“Construction is, to a large extent, a game of control,” says Vernon Boyett, president of Boyett Construction, Inc., South San Francisco.

Boyett knows the construction industry. A second-generation contractor, he got an early start in his father’s drywall business. When the time came to move out on his own, he took the bottom rung of a large national interiors contractor and worked for 18 years learning from people he characterizes as some of the smartest men in the business.

As he climbed the ladder, Boyett made every project a study. By visualizing the beginning, the middle and the end of each project, and setting touchstones for his crews, he was able to focus the crews’ attention on the tread running the most direct route through the project.

As his projects became larger and margins got tighter in the middle of the 1980s, the managers became progressively more interested in the numbers. Dollars drove the project, and manpower was anonymous and expendable. A key element in the decision to start his own business was Boyett’s respect for the men he worked with in the field.

Boyett says, “I believe that a company will achieve its greatest success by providing a good game plan with sound controls, and then committing each person on the project to the plan. There is a temptation, particularly in a boom period, to send work out to the field and hope for the best, but without a game...
of Control

Today, Boyett Construction, in its 10th year of business, occupies the solid center for a very dynamic Bay Area drywall/plaster industry. With upward of 100 workers on 30 to 40 projects, his notions of “control” sometimes become a little abstract. Boyett credits his partner, James Roberts, with much of the company’s field success. Roberts, the company’s secretary-treasurer, also functions as manager of construction. “It’s a challenge keeping a large crew moving,” Roberts says. “But our commitment to our core crew is to keep them busy, even if it means taking a lower percentage project to bridge a slow period. When we take one tight, we make sure everyone knows what the project has, and we enlist their support in hitting that target.”

A Skilled Work Force

John Bovenzi, estimator and project manager for Boyett, says, “Getting and keeping a skilled work force is our biggest challenge. In 1985, an independent research group did a study of the Bay Area construction industry, which included a broad survey of high school seniors. Among its findings were two that have loomed large in our planning meetings. The study...
found that the construction trades have an image problem that places them at the bottom of a list of desirable professions, second only to sanitation worker. The second finding was that, due to image problems and numerous other factors, including substantial reduction in apprenticeship programs, they predicted severe manpower shortages in the trades by the year 2000.

“A skilled work force’ means something different to us,” Bovenzi continues. “Because of the diversity of work that occurs in our marketplace, and because of the way we have structured our business around specialty niches, we realized early on that we couldn’t rely on the local work force to produce specialty trained workers in sufficient numbers to support our growth plans.

“Boyett Construction is a union firm, and, while the union has done a lot of good for our industry, it has fostered some trends that hurt the contractors. Unions are conditioned to think of labor as a commodity, with a journeyman interchangeable with every other journeyman. While, from the workers’ point of view, with wages and benefits determined by the union, employers are often viewed as a monolithic group differentiated only in small ways.”

Among the ways Boyett has sought to differentiate itself and encourage employee loyalty, is by creating crews that stay together and specialize in specific types of work. Says Roberts, “We value all our workers, but it would be a mistake for us and for them to put a restaurant crew on a seismic upgrade, or an office tenant improvement crew on a retail store. They could get the job done, but it would likely feel for all parties involved like riding to the finish
line on a square wheel. When a client requests a specific crew for their project, we know our planning and training is paying off.”

**Finding the Market**

When Boyett Construction started business, they started doing what they knew best. Coming from a big-job contractor and the office boom of the 1970s and early 1980s, they were experienced in core work and multi-floor office build-outs. The work was plentiful and easy to manage with a moderately skilled workforce. Says Boyett, “That work was a matter of developing a format and duplicating and refining it floor after floor. If we made a profit on the first floor, we would make profit plus 20 percent by the time we got to the roof.” Many of the start-up companies that entered the market at the same time as Boyett are still competing for a dwindling share of that market.

Boyett saw the changes in the late 1980s as office building declined and their “bread and butter” became more and more competitive. While others scrambled for a bigger share to offset the smaller margin, or went prospecting in uncharted territory for “fringe projects” that brought fewer competitors, Boyett began to develop “specialty niches.” Today less than 20 percent of their work is in office improvement. With the help of their specialty trained crews, the lead in retail and restaurant build-outs, two lucrative markets all but forsaken by Bay Area union contractors because of the difficulty competing with open shops.

Another of Boyett’s target niches is seismic upgrades, a burgeoning business in the nearly 10 years since the Loma Prieta earthquake. Says Boyett, “Seismic upgrade of schools, churches and unreinforced masonry buildings require a team of workers with related but different skills and skill levels, from demolition to plastering and finish carpentry, and they must work together seamlessly in areas where traditional lines of trade responsibility often overlap. Add to that the schedule—on opening day, the school opens with or without you. We found that by combining the various skills in a single-source subcontractor, with single point of responsibility, we could provide a value-added service that our clients are willing to pay for.”

**Lessons in Safety**

Safety is another element of control. “About five years ago, when we started to grow rapidly and had to bring on new personnel, we needed special focus on safety,” Boyett says. “With the help of our insurance company, we developed safety programs that continue to provide a safe working environment for all of our employees.”

Company-wide safety meetings are combined with opportunities to discuss general concerns affecting the crew? day-to-day work, and “we find piggy-backing bonus checks or company give-aways onto our safety meetings help us to keep audience attention,” Boyett says.

In today’s safety-conscious environment, a good safety record is a big chip to bring to the table. In Boyett’s case, it has resulted in numerous negotiated projects. Thanks to their safety record, Boyett was awarded a sizable project with Shell Oil, which sets a very rigid
safety standard, even though Boyett was not the lowest bidder.

Boyett explains that contractors want to work with subcontractors who are professional, safety conscious and who do quality, timely work. This leads to more negotiated work. “If a contractor wants to work with you, and your price is in the ballpark, he’ll find a way to work with you,” Boyett says.

By the same token, most of the marketing is done in the field. “It’s based on performance, not by going out and making friends,” Boyett says. “If you communicate very well with a particular contractor, do what you say you’re going to do and help him accomplish his goals, then you don’t have to go to him; he’ll come to you. A good field force puts the estimator in a good negotiating position and makes it easier for him to get jobs.”

**Growing Toward the Future**

The employees at Boyett are optimistic about the future of their industry. Looking at their past, they have good reason. Gross sales have grown from $2.5 million in 1992 to $10 million in 1996. Much of their growth happened in a time when the overall construction market was shrinking. The big boom of 1997, which, by all indications, is a precursor to the bigger boom of 1998, brings with it new challenges.

According to Bovenzi, “What we’re looking for in 1998 is controlled growth, an opportunity to consolidate some of our specialty markets and develop our skills. When we bulge to 125 persons in the field, we do it from necessity. Our experience tells us we do our best work and are most profitable with a crew of 90 to 100. In times like these we use temporary expansions as an opportunity to scout the prospects for four or five people who will fill a spot on our A team, and give us a dimensions we didn’t have last year.

“If all we had to look forward to was becoming better at drywall, it would be tough to sustain the energy it takes to keep us out in front. But San Francisco offers opportunities for the construction trades that very few cities can. The sophistication of our clients, the design community and the Bay Area building stock make every day a new day. Our long-range plan is simple: to position ourselves so that we stay on the front of the huge wave generated by the Bay Area construction community.”

Boyett, in closing, asks, “If this article gets published, I would like to take this opportunity to publicly thank all our employees and their families for making Boyett Construction the company that we started out 10 years ago to build.”

**About the Author**

Michael J. Major of Anacortes, Wash., is a free-lance writer for the construction industry.