Bill Rice Has the Secret for Motivating Employees

A LOYAL WORKFORCE IS THE KEY TO SUCCESS

By Michael J. Major

“Until you can motivate the guy shoveling sand into the mixture, you can’t say your company is stable,” says Bill Rice, president, Commercial Plastering, Inc., Bradenton, Fla. “Because when he stops shoveling, you’re out of business.”

Most business owners say their employees are the key to their success, just as they say they provide quality results. They all may be telling the truth, but some ring truer than others. Rice is one of them.

“I know, because I’ve been there,” he says. “I didn’t start out as an estimator. I was the one mixing the mud and carrying the lath around. I never forget where these people are and how they look at things. I keep them in mind no matter what I do. I don’t think sitting in an ivory tower and being untouchable is a good way to run this business.”

TOUGH CHILDHOOD

Rice came up the hard way. He started lathing plaster when he was 14 for his brother-in-law, who lied about his age to get him into the union. At age 15 he ran away from home. By age 20 he was married with two young children. At age 23, just after he purchased a new home, he suddenly found himself without a job. He noticed that his and the surrounding houses needed a lot of stucco, and the contractor didn’t have anybody doing it.

“I told him, you’ve got one of two choices, either give me a chance or take your house back,” Rice recalls. “I didn’t really start this business by choice. But I had to do something. And there was this need. I figured I was as smart as the people around me were, so I started putting stucco on houses.”

Starting your own business at age 23 is not easy “I had a van that when you opened it, the door it would fall off,” Rice recalls. “I started with nothing.” Growth came slowly at first because people weren’t inclined to place much trust in a business run by a man in his 20s.

Rice continually had to prove himself “I spent more money doing the work than most people,” says Rice. “But I felt that if I didn’t have the quality to offer, what did I have?”

Rice knew he couldn’t grow the company by himself He needed to attract and retain good people, “My philosophy in
running a company is that people don’t just want that extra $50 in their pocket. The main thing they want is security for their family. I remember that in the company I worked for before, the people were older. I asked them to train me so I could run it while they retired. They weren’t interested. But that’s the key thing that I remembered—what I really wanted was the security.”

For this reason Rice has worked hard to create a family atmosphere in the company, with ongoing picnics, dinners and fishing trips. He offers 401K plans and health insurance, which most companies in his area don’t offer.

“I give away rings—a lo-year service one, a 15-year one with a ruby and a 20-year one with a diamond,” Rice says. “It’s a way of saying thank you before they retire. The trick is keeping good people to stay with him. “I get about two very good people a year,” Rice says. “They become core people. I’ve been in business 22 years, so that makes about 44.” Rice has, in all, 136 employees and does an annual volume of between $6 million and $7 million.

A key aspect of having a good work
force is training. “I try to give a good foundation and teach the principles of the work—why things are done the way they are,” Rice says. “If people don’t understand why they are doing what they are doing, it limits their effectiveness. I try to get people to look at the overall picture, from the ground up, and why certain actions produce certain results. Every product you use has certain characteristics. You have to know why you use it in a certain way and why what happens, happens.”

**DOING THE JOB**

Because Florida is a very competitive market, Rice attempts to differentiate his company by doing work nobody else either wants or can handle. Here, again, the experienced, loyal and well trained work force plays a critical role. “We’ll do the everyday block boxes like everybody else, but if the job is different, we really go after it. We want people to say, ‘Gee, this is a difficult job, who can we get to do it?’, and then think of us.”

The Asalo Theater, U.S. Customs Office and a recent $1 million renovation of the John Bingling Museum are examples of Rice’s challenging jobs. But one of the most notable is his current project, the Sarasota Downtown Library.

“About a year ago I got a call from an architect who was doing a downtown library project,” Rice says. “He had a basic picture of what he wanted it to look like, but not a clue as to how to get there. Sarasota is a very artistic town and wanted a library with a lot of character in it. Moreover, he wanted a building that would last 100 years.”

Rice worked with the architect to find ways to implement the design, as he often does, “regardless of whether we get the job or not, for a good building is good for the industry.” He did get this job, however.

A block frame was built, which supported a lath and plaster façade sur-
rounding the building, making possible a wide variety of different shapes, curved walls and moldings that were put together with galvanized channel iron, metal lath and stucco. The original design envisioned two columns made of precast concrete, bell-shaped 7 feet around the bottom, tapering to 2 feet around the top. In addition, there was scalloping with both and inside radius and an outside one, making the calculations very complicated.

“Concrete would have been enormously expensive, so we put it together using lath and plaster, at a considerable savings to the county,” Rice says.

However, because the building is meant to last 100 years, the dentals or “teeth” around the top of the building were made out of solid cement rather than molding. All the exterior walls are curved, with the windows constituting compound curves separating the windows from the walls and making them stand out. The $12 million building consists of two 40,000-square-foot floors. Total construction time is one year, with Rice’s job taking about five months.

“What I hate to hear in the industry is talk about the lost art of building,” Rice says. “There are better materials today and better technology having to do with plaster and stucco and better rubbers to make molds and templates with. It doesn’t have to be a lost art. It can just as easily be a newly discovered art.”

This library project and ones like it, at least one of which is going all of the time, is very important for the company.

“These buildings set us apart,” Rice says, “and it’s a joy to build something out of the ordinary, something to lift us up from the everyday back-breaking work. It’s good for the employees’ morale too, to see something beautiful that they’ve had their hands on.”

**AGGRESSIVE APPROACH**

Another differentiating aspect of the company is that it takes a very aggres-
sive approach. “If the work needs to get done, we’ll get it done,” Rice says. “There was a condominium project in Clearwater that someone else started but was falling behind in, so we took over. We have dedicated people willing to drop everything and put forth the effort to make it happen. We try to listen to the general contractor and listen to what his needs are, rather than just trying to look out after ourselves.”

Because of his company’s drive and initiative, it’s able to negotiate about 25 percent of its work, which is good in Florida’s very competitive environment. “But you have to prove yourself every day,” Rice says. “For the way people look at you, you’re no better than your worst job.”

Rice maintained this attitude when, about five years ago, the Florida economy got real bad and pulled the business down. Up to that time, the company had experienced steady growth and in the past two years rebuilt what was lost. How did Rice make it through those bad years?

“We didn’t cost cut, but did everything we could to keep paying our people who have been here with us for a while and we strove to keep up our level of quality,” Rice says. “We were very careful not to destroy our reputation. Everybody talks about the time and the cost, but when that’s gone, all that remains is the quality. If you let that go, then you’ve taken away any reason clients should use you rather than someone else.”

The Private Side

Rice, 45, now has his two children in college. He’s no longer married, but has a significant other. He loves flying airplanes, boating, fishing, diving and snow skiing. He’s very active in the community. “I work hard and play hard,” he says.

Rice has also had a long involvement in the Association of the Wall and Ceiling Industries—International.

“I felt that if I was going to be in this industry all my life, I had better learn all I could about it,” he says. “AWCI has led me to every new product and to every expert in the industry. It’s always good to listen, and AWCI is always providing an opportunity where you can learn new things. You can talk to your immediate competitors. But you can talk to contractors throughout the country and find out how they do things and be introduced to techniques and products that might not even be in your area.

“The biggest problem we have in the industry is manpower and training. AWCI is doing a lot to meet these challenges. I feel that if I didn’t take people in as laborers, train them for years and years, giving them the opportunity to move up in the company, making it a secure environment and a happy place to work, I wouldn’t have made it as far as I have.”

About the Author

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