

Celebrating the death of the 'Don't make waves' system

by Denise Norberg

Very early in the movie "The Crimson Tide," a nuclear submarine captain tells his crew, "We're here to preserve democracy, not to practice it." This captain thinks that his most immediate problem is the tendency of his second-in-command to think, to break ranks, and at times, to commit the unpardonable sin of questioning his judgments.

In wartime, any breach of authority is intolerable. Military discipline and unity are paramount, because order must be maintained. Our construction jobsites have operated in much the same way. The ranking structure was a pyramid, and those at the top had the most power. You did what you were told if you were outranked, and you did not question the method or goal.

Each player knew his place, and the overriding rule was, "Don't break ranks, and don't make waves. Just get the job done."

Somewhere along the way, the world changed. In the 1960s, people stopped trusting their government without question. Corporations began to bend to employee demands. The balance of power began to shift to the bottom of the pyramid.

Even the construction industry began to catch on to the "feel good" issues. We like to think that we understand cooperation, partnering, safety and diversity. Our sites can no longer be war zones, because conflict makes us losers in the eyes of the owners we work to please.

Unfortunately, with all of the changes that have occurred, the worst rule still prevails on most projects: Don't break ranks, and don't make waves. We aren't solving problems because we aren't communicating. We don't want to see the problems, we don't debrief, and we don't learn anything about how to make our future projects better and more profitable for everyone.

Expediency beats honesty as surely as a royal flush beats a pair of deuces in this poker game. Because that's what our war zones have become—giant poker games where he who shifts the most risk wins the pot. The big joke is on the winner, however. The pot is so small that it isn't worth winning most of the time. And, the owners are the biggest losers of all.

So, we need another game to play. We need practice real team building, because winning the game means depending on each other. We have to learn the game of problem-solving and discard the games of "cover up the mistake" and "lie to the owner." That means bringing the wave-makers back from exile, and making them the leaders of the new game.

You can't stand still in a river, and you can drown fighting the current; but, if you harness the current in that river, you make it work for you. Then you have hydroelectric power instead of death by drowning.

If we are to welcome new paradigms, then we will have to release the old belief system, which is no longer a life vest, but an anchor taking us to the bottom of the river that is our construction industry. Paradigm shifts will unveil the real power of subcontractors and suppliers to harness the currents of jobsite success without drowning in them. In fact, we have always had

that power, but we were so busy trying not to drown that we never figured out how to harness the current.

In the past, we allowed our clients to bid shop us, withhold payment, and hold us hostage with heinous contracts. We played their win-lose game, and everyone lost, including the owners who got substandard products. Finally, general contractors and owners are beginning to see that subcontractors and suppliers are always found a way to balance an unfair deal. They want smart team players, who know their obligations and will meet them, instead of cheating later on to balance out a bad deal.

I had a client once who bragged about building his \$1,000,000 house for \$700,000, and complained because we would not "negotiate" like his other subs. In my view, he was really building a \$700,000 house. Like a movie set, the substance did not live up to the first impression.

Clients can control two of the three factors in a negotiation: price, quality and schedule. The sub will always control the third. That is the law of business, or we do not survive.

When those performing 80 to 100 percent of the work begin to harness their own power, they can afford to be cooperative. They can participate in value engineering projects before a bad design is out for bid. They can assist in developing schedules that are achievable. They can afford to raise problems and solve them, instead of covering the bad work of other trades just to get the job done.

Working together really means building partnerships, allocating risks to those best able to control them, and rewarding those who perform instead of protecting the unqualified whiners.

We won't build effective teams without repeat relationships, and that means not taking the low number and the unknown player on each project. It also means that conflict is acceptable, when it is managed to resolve issues.

Subs have the duty to drive changes. We already have the real power. Now we must claim a proactive role. Like Miguel de Cervantes' character Don Quixote, each of us may fight a lonely battle for a new reality. But, like Don Quixote, we can change reality for others if we don't give up.

Being a wave-maker is a thankless job. No one likes uncomfortable truths. When we fight those lonely battles, we should remember that Teddy Roosevelt understood what that type of leadership was all about, when he said:

"It is not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled or why the doer of good deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood...who, at the best, knows in the end the triumph of high achievement; and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never lie with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat." □

(Denise Norberg is the immediate past president of the American Subcontractors Association, Alexandria, VA, and president of Gust A. Norberg & Son, Chicago.)



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