

BY DAN KOLBERT

NESEA Building Energy Bottom Lines

I have started working with a peer network that's an offshoot of my favorite builder's organization, Northeast Sustainable Energy Association (NESEA). One focus of this new networking group, dubbed Bottom Lines, is helping insure the future of our industry. The group operates much like other business networks: Members gather at one business at a time and delve deeply into finances, personnel, practices, and the like to identify areas of strength and weakness, and help the owner (or owners) develop a plan for improvement.

FOCUS ON PEOPLE

A unique aspect of this group is our focus on people. The question of *why* we stay in business is not typically asked at business training meetings such as these. But the way employees feel about a company can have a direct impact on the financial bottom line—happy crewmembers are more productive, do better work, and are apt to stay with a company longer. So this group asks the tough questions: Are the employees treated well? Are they paid at a level that allows them to live a good life? Are they provided with opportunities for growth and rewarding work?

The organizers of this group have thought long and hard about what makes their own businesses work and what the building industry in general needs. Each one

facilitates a Bottom Lines group of 10 or more companies. When I signed up, I didn't know what to expect. But I was attracted to the idea of mutual support and had tremendous respect for the group leaders.

My group, headed up by Paul Eldrenkamp (his company, Byggmeister, is also a member), has met at four different companies so far. I played host at the most recent meeting, and I'm still absorbing the things we discussed. I had been going through a rough patch in my business, and our meeting helped clarify some of the problems and opportunities I was facing. But the "people" part of this meeting was clearly the most important.

I had a difficult personnel situation with a long-term employee who was having trouble moving into a more supervisory role. His reluctance had alienated some promising crewmembers who had taken me a long time to recruit and hire. I was torn between loyalty and reality and wasn't sure what direction to take.

The meeting happened over two days. The first morning was spent in a roundtable check-in, sharing current issues and getting feedback and giving updates on past problems we've discussed. In the afternoon, we prepped for the deep dive into the host company—mine. The next day, we broke into groups of four for a series of interviews with people associated with my business, including an ex-employee now working on his own, a recent client, and my lumber salesman of two decades. After that, I was interviewed along with my three crewmembers—all individually.

The group then convened without me for a while, before inviting me back in. In the end, I got mixed messages about how to solve my situation. Some said to let the problem employee go immediately, while others said to define his role and see what happens.

TAKING ACTION

Since the meeting, I made the painful but necessary choice to let that person go. I may have come to that conclusion on my own over time, but it would have been a longer and messier process, and I wouldn't have felt the same clarity I got from discussing it with a group of peers I have come to trust and respect. As difficult as the decision was, it immediately had a positive impact on my business.

Another employee-related topic we've discussed



Training the Trades

is wages. Using an online calculation tool (livingwage.mit.edu) developed by Dr. Amy Glasmeier of MIT, we looked at cost-of-living data from around the Northeast to see if our wages sustained our employees. For my area (Portland, Maine), a living wage varies from \$11 an hour for a single adult to \$24.50 an hour for an adult supporting a spouse and two children. I was pleased to learn I was paying wages that were significantly higher than the levels that my various employees happened to be at in their lives—and I offered significant benefits on top of that.

The Bottom Lines group is also working on lead-carpenter training, which should make a huge difference in companies' ability to advance employees and to recruit new ones. Recently, a group of lead field employees from companies around New England spent several days at Yestermorrow, in Vermont, laying the groundwork for what should be included in the training.

Though we all have different businesses and operate in different localities, we share many common issues. Finding and keeping new talent is an issue we all struggle with, and one that is always discussed at our meetings. As one member of my group, Steve Greenberg, of Steveworks, in Newton, Mass., says, "In our smaller groups, we are able to help each other solve our hiring difficulties and learn from each other about our 'people' policies. This has been of critical importance of late, as it's one of the major factors limiting company growth."

We have shared strategies—those that work and those that don't—and given each other advice on what to do about key or problematic personnel. Many of us have brought at least some of our team to the network meetings—interviewing employees is a critical piece of the site visits to each other's businesses.

While we can't magically create a supply of skilled workers, we can discuss how to attract those who are available and nurture growth in them. We are planning another summit this fall, and I'll be leading a workshop on finding the next generation of tradespeople, which continues to be a major issue under discussion.

Dan Kolbert is a building contractor in Portland, Maine. For more information about Bottom Lines, visit nesea.org/buildingenergy-bottom-lines.