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Defining Your Company's Legacy

The Pieper Houston Story: Defining The Company's Legacy

by Stephane McShane

If you ask your customers—and your employees—to define what your company stands for, what do you hope they will say? What legacy is being defined? Certainly, the major contributing factors to that legacy are your reputation, your business practices and most importantly, your people.

It is common for companies to have a definition of how they want to be viewed. Many have published mission, visions, and values. Having these defined is great, but do we believe it? Do we live it? Why does legacy matter? Simply put, it is well known that people remember the great things that you've done, but they remember the bad things longer.

Pieper-Houston Electric, an ASA member company in Houston, Texas, has produced an environment that many may wish to replicate. They have developed an enviable business model, exceptional team atmosphere, and a leadership culture that is nothing short of amazing.

Pieper-Houston CEO Bud Walters says that the secret to his company's success is having great people. That is the standard and heartfelt answer that defines the legacy of Pieper Houston. In lieu of using profit as the primary driver to success, the focus at Pieper-Houston is to develop people, process, and technology first. Increased profit is a measurable and important, but downstream, effect.

Paying Respect to the Past

Pieper Houston was established in 1958 as a small, family owned residential contractor. The focus was on developing a company with a family culture and a level of customer focus unparalleled in their market. The company was founded on the roots of strong relationships and negotiated work.

In building a history and a legacy for an organization, we must understand that how we have conducted business in the past will either enable or cripple our

future ability to succeed. This is the difference between decision-making based on short-term goals, or developing a culture poised for long-term success. At Pieper, the culture was developed early to nurture and develop customer relationships to ensure that they exist well into the future.

How about the internal clients? The philosophy does not change whether the focus is on internal or external customers. The construction industry can be a nomadic business, with long-term employees becoming a rare commodity. At Pieper Houston, that is the norm, not the exception. Building a team of franchise players has enabled the company to scale with trusted, proven performers. As an example, their field operations officer has been with the company for 37 years. His career began as a green apprentice working in the field. He is now responsible for managing the 275-person field crew.

"During these 37 years I have experienced the highs and lows of the organization and the economy that drives our industry," says Willie Cyr, field operations officer. "Cutting grass, fixing boat trailers, sweeping floors, or whatever it took during the lean years. There were Christmas bonuses that consisted of a turkey or ham ... but, there was always something. After Hurricane Katrina, a spare building was converted to a home for displaced residents from Louisiana and the outpouring of help and donations from Pieper was fantastic. When Hurricane Rita closed the city of Houston and





forced millions to leave home, many Pieper employees were also impacted. Every one of the Pieper employees returned home safely and received a full paycheck, no questions asked. Leaders have been given the opportunity to improve themselves not only on a professional basis, but also on a personal basis, so that family lives can improve. The common denominator in all of these examples is the caring philosophy that has been demonstrated and continues to be demonstrated in this organization (family). It may not seem like much to receive a turkey as a Christmas bonus, but when it's a lean year for the company and the owner comes out of his pocket to make sure that his employees (family) don't go without, it speaks volumes."

The examples of home-grown executives are also evident in longevity of Pieper's president (31 years), chief financial officer (30 years), and chief estimator (36 years). All agree that the past has demonstrated the company's admirable, unwavering set of core values, and has solidified their commitment to the continued success of Pieper Houston.

Celebrating Current Successes—Living in the Present

With humble beginnings in small residential construction to its transformation to today, it is apparent that the foundations of solid business practices and engagement of its employees has led Pieper to be one of the undisputed leaders in its market.

So, what is the secret to maintaining such a level of success? In the construction industry, it is difficult to remember to celebrate the successes of today. It is easy to overlook the opportunity to recognize those who are contributing heavily to the financial success of the organization. From the field to the office, and at all levels of the organization, the pride of working at Pieper Houston is prominently displayed.

Organizational structure is critical in ensuring that the right people have the authority and responsibility to perform their duties effectively. The focus on safety is evident, with an outstanding record and well-documented processes. This rare level of employee engagement, however, is all based on Pieper's commitment to supporting and developing people.

Not a day goes by where a member of the executive team is not checking in with members of their staff, offering insight, assistance, or simply lending an ear. On a weekly basis, foremen or field personnel in the office discuss ideas, contribute field perspectives, and mold the team atmosphere that drives positive project performance. This is far from a dictatorship model of leadership. This is collaboration at its finest, with internal clients being held in the very highest regard.

Members of the executive team prefer to be called champions as it is their mission to take the "great people" and give them even more opportunity to grow. One of the internal champions states: "Bud has created a work environment that feels more like family than work... We treat everyone with respect and value their ideas. We want everyone to reach their full potential."

The employees of Pieper Houston are successful and are given the tools and opportunity to grow. The end result is a positive atmosphere which drives productivity and raises profitability. This is certainly no accident. When you ask Walters how he has achieved his current success, his answer is always steadfast, "We have great people."

Planning for Performance Excellence—The Future Defined

There is a danger that exists when the tenure of the executive group is as long as Pieper Houston's. The concept of not knowing what is occurring outside of the walls of your own organization can severely limit the progression and improvements that firms must make to remain relevant and profitable. The solution to that is visionary leadership.

Walters has been heavily involved with ASA for many years, serving as vice president and president of its

board of directors of ASA–Houston Chapter. Walters has leveraged the educational opportunities provided by ASA to ensure that he and his operations team stay up to date with advances in the industry and opportunities for professional growth. Because of this focus on the future, Pieper Houston has embarked on an improvement initiative that will position it strongly as a continued leader operationally, financially, and structurally. Reaching out externally for assistance from Maxim Consulting Group, Denver, Colo., is expediting these critical improvements.

They have created and enabled teams to define, implement, and train on the improvements as internal subject matter experts—in essence, creating internal change management experts to ensure that the organization remains agile, evolving, and on the leading edge of technology improvements. Their move toward total process control will separate them from others in the industry, creating a seamless and transparent environment

where estimating, BIM and CAD design, purchasing, manufacturing, and field execution all flourish. This transformational thinking and entrepreneurial spirit exists at many levels of the organization. Their staff is completely on board as they witness the positive impact of the changes. This is where history proves the point and drives the current success. This is an exciting, albeit rare, combination of attributes.

It is not just the internal customers of Pieper Houston that recognize its excellence. Their external customers are invested as well in Pieper’s continued success. As Pat Pollard, vice president, Tellepsen Builders, LLC, lightheartedly teases: “Pieper is one boring subcontractor out there ... no drama, no chaos, good looking work, great team, good team players ... Happy owner ... What the hell is that all about?”

It is rare to find a company that still pays respect to the strong foundations of its core values. Even more uncommon is seeing that same company living very much in the

present to operate with speed, agility, and unwavering customer focus. To have one company recognize its past, live exceptionally in the present, while strategically positioning itself as an industry leader for the future is truly a shining example of excellence. The secret to Pieper Houston’s success? Talented staff, visionary leadership, loyal customers, well-defined strategy, transparent project performance metrics, and world-class technology solutions.

All those wonderful attributes aside, what is the legacy they hope to leave behind? The legacy will be left by the people it has touched, those it has influenced over time, and those lives it has improved along the way. If you sit in Bud Walters’ office long enough, you will hear him sing the praises of his staff at all levels, not taking one iota of credit in the conversation, but very much the innovator responsible. If you ask him why Pieper has been, continues to be, and will continue to be an industry leader in the future, he will always respond with, “We have great people.”

Stephane McShane is an associate director at Maxim Consulting Group responsible for the evaluation and implementation processes with our clients. She works with construction-related firms of all sizes to evaluate business practices and assist with management challenges. With a large depth of experience working in the construction industry, McShane is keenly aware of the business and, most specifically, operational challenges firms’ face. Her areas of expertise include: Leadership development, organizational assessments, strategic planning, project execution, business development, productivity improvement, and training programs. McShane is an internationally recognized speaker, mentor, author, and teacher. Her ability to motivate, inspire, and create confidence among your work groups is extremely rare and very effective.

