

Integrity and Honesty: Core Principles of Success

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As one who owns and directs an international construction company, I thought it might be helpful to provide a brief background concerning the ethical battles I face in business and outline some of the lessons and principles we try to follow in my company concerning appropriate business practices.

Costco, the giant merchandiser headquartered in Issaquah, Washington, constitutes a little more than half of our annual construction business. We also do work for Staples Company and build industrial manufacturing plants for other clients. To date we have built approximately forty-eight million square feet of Costco projects. Consider their demanding schedule: 110 days from groundbreaking to completion of the facility. And each project includes a twenty-five-year warranty. This kind of schedule and quality of workmanship creates ethical challenges

that often confront us in fulfilling our contracts. Constructing large commercial facilities fast is always a challenge. Their largest distribution center is 1.2 million square feet and was built on a fast-track basis.

We are also building the Gordon B. Hinckley Alumni and Visitors Center on the northwest corner of the Brigham Young University campus. The groundbreaking for that magnificent structure took place in June of 2006, on President Hinckley's ninety-sixth birthday.

One of the major challenges in our business is to complete projects we do on time and within budget. It requires high morale and high productivity from our work crews. In today's environment, companies want their projects built faster, better, and at lower cost. Projects challenge our ingenuity as they become more complex, larger, and taller. We operate in a global economy, and laws we follow in the United States do not always apply in foreign countries. Bribes, for example, and other unethical and illegal behavior are more common and acceptable in some countries.

The issue comes down to, how can we be successful in today's demanding construction business? We all want to succeed. We all want to make a living. We all want to please our clients. The question we continually face is, do we adapt our policies and principles to the level of honesty and integrity in the country in which we are operating? Or do we stand firm on our principles and disregard the consequences? I have found that success in my business requires me to combine the principles from my educational background along with lessons gleaned by practical experience while espousing the principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This formula works for me and my company in a miraculous way. Obviously, on construction projects we deal with people who have different values and different standards.

Let me list five principles I find crucial to our success in today's business climate. Most of these seem pretty basic and sensible. Practicing these principles without compromise is a constant challenge.

1. Keep commitments. Written contracts are necessary, for they keep both parties honest. Each project has its own contract provisions that outline the project's demands. But that is insufficient. To be ethical in keeping commitments requires a dedicated and conscientious effort on the part of every employee in the company and helps to establish the

reputation that we honor our word. A promise made must be a promise kept, though an old cliché, is essential for success in business.

Framed on one of the walls in the Abraham O. Smoot Administration Building on BYU campus is the following quote: “Fulfill your contracts and sacredly keep your word.”¹ Making and keeping the provisions of the agreed-upon contract is a sacred commitment on my part.

2. *Be honest.* In this conference, integrity is being addressed. Honesty is an essential part of integrity. Let me share something I have used to guide me over the years. Mahatma Gandhi, the Indian leader who helped India gain its independence from England through nonviolent means, said, “There is one honest man for every hundred that claim to be honest.” The point is that most of us know what is right, but few of us actually put it into practice. In being honest, we should not only avoid the sins of commission but also sins of omission. I have to remind myself that not telling the client everything is not being totally honest. I know that I have some work to do in that area, but we need to avoid sins of omission as well as sins of commission.

3. *Honor the Sabbath.* It is customary in the construction business to work long hours, often seven days a week. Sundays are workdays in many businesses. Sometimes it is very challenging for my firm not to work on Sundays. In my own mind, I have substituted 24–7 with 35–6. I have found the Lord’s promise to be true. By working six days and honoring the Sabbath, our productivity and outcome are multiplied. I have often joked that when I was baptized, I received two gifts: the gift of the Holy Ghost and a new wristwatch that gives me thirty-five hours in a day! Fortunately or unfortunately, it functions like the Liahona in the Book of Mormon. When I do the right things, my watch gives me thirty-five hours a day. When I waste time, it does not give me even twenty-four hours a day. The gift of time is real to me when I keep the Sabbath day holy.

Let me share a real-life example of how I was challenged on this very principle. As I indicated earlier, Costco Corporation is our largest

1. John A. Widtsoe, comp., *Discourses of Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1941), 232.

client. Meeting a 110-day schedule, from building pad to completion, is very challenging. Once Costco announces the date for its store opening, there is no turning back; it is cast in concrete. I certainly do not want my firm to be the reason they don't meet their opening commitment.

In the construction business there are always challenges that are beyond our control: weather, building departments, building permits, strikes, delayed shipments, weekend deliveries. These and other factors can cause delays in the construction process. I remember attending a scheduling meeting on site where the executive vice president in charge of store construction addressed the team and expressed concerns that the project was running behind schedule and asked each one of us to commit to increase manpower and work overtime, including Saturdays and Sundays, to bring the project back on schedule. He offered to pay the cost to meet this commitment. He received assurances from the subcontractors, including the electricians, plumbers, mechanical and sprinkler subcontractors, and so on. Everyone offered suggestions on how they intended to improve the schedule and what additional expenses would be incurred. Without trying to make a big issue of it, I stated, "I understand your requirements, and we will work six days a week to meet your goal." The company official thought I had misunderstood his request. He said, "On this project I would like you to work your crews on Sundays."

I knew in my heart that if I walked away from that meeting without saying anything, the meaning to him would have been clear that I was agreeing to his demands. Again I reiterated, "I do not work my crews on Sunday, but we will come up with a plan to meet your time schedule."

Suddenly, the tension grew thick. It was obvious that he was not happy with my response. He said something I will never forget, although it was disappointing to me at the time. He said to me, "You mean to tell me that you will not work your guys on Sundays on this one project to make up the time?"

I said, "Well, you know, we just don't work on Sundays, but I'll see what I can do to meet your commitment."

He then shocked me with this comment: “You would not work your men on Sundays even if it means you could lose this entire account?”

Well, to me this was one of those defining moments in life. I said, as humbly as I could, “I hope it doesn’t come to that, but if it does, I’m sorry; I will not work my guys on Sundays.”

There was a brief silence as everyone took in what we both had said. I’ll never forget what happened next. He walked over to me and stood inches from my chest and said, “You’d better meet that commitment.”

With that, he walked out of the trailer. Later, the architect told me that the man had said as he walked out of the trailer, “That guy is one stubborn Indian.”

What that experience did for me turned out to be amazing even though my intent was different at the time. Since that day, his respect and trust in what I have done for Costco and what my company has accomplished increased substantially. Now, for nineteen straight years, we have received *exclusive agreements* to build all Costco projects because he knows we will not compromise our principles in meeting our commitments. I should tell you that we did meet our commitment on that project. And within the next two or three months, we will celebrate a major milestone with Costco by completing fifty million square feet of their projects.

4. *Practice safety.* How does this principle apply to being ethical? There are significant costs to running a business safely, especially construction. For example, the new Gordon B. Hinckley Alumni and Visitors Center is a steel framed structure. At its tallest point, the building is 122 feet high. I have steel workers working at different heights on that project. We must work safely to avoid injuries as well as lost time. While Dave Anthony, assistant dean of engineering, and I were visiting some construction sites in California, I expressed concerns about the safety of my crews who work at various heights off the ground and told him that we developed and patented a safety-net system we use on every project to protect workers. As an incentive for them to be careful, we announced that each employee would receive one dollar an hour more at

the end of every project if that project ran without any safety infractions or major injuries. Can you appreciate the fact that constructing a project without injury to workers amounts to millions of dollars saved in most cases? I feel a moral and ethical responsibility to protect the lives of my workers and to construct a project safely.

5. *Implement a drug and alcohol testing program.* Every week, on every project no matter where it is across the country or across the world, 10 percent of our employees are randomly tested for drug and alcohol use. Every worker on the project that day (we try to keep the testing on the same day), puts their names in a hat and a worker pulls the names of those to be tested out of the hat. They are immediately taken to a portable unit where they are tested for drug and alcohol use. And guess what happened on one occasion! I was at a construction site on the day when every employee at that location had to be included. I was not exempt from the process, and my name went into the hat. Yes, you guessed it, my name was pulled out of the hat. Sheepishly my superintendent came to inform me, “Your name was pulled out of the hat, and we have to test you.” And you know what? I was pleased to do it. You do not have to guess whether I passed or failed. There is a cost of running a building project safely. We cannot have workers who are using alcohol or drugs working in precarious places. Other workers depend on those with whom they work. Obviously, productivity is better when everyone works safely together.

Conclusion

Everything I have shared with you, including not working on Sundays and our safety program, is all written in our company manual. We honor the Word of Wisdom, even in a construction and engineering business. These principles are outlined in our company policy. We try to follow section 89 as best as we can. Anybody caught violating that principle has been terminated. Clean language is also written into our company policy. I feel that to run an honest, ethical company with construction workers from various backgrounds, clean, uplifting language is needed.

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Let me conclude by summarizing what I have said. Knowing what is right, what is expected of us, and what to do is not the difficult question. The challenge is always to put into practice what we know. I ascribe to the counsel given by the Apostle James: “Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves” (James 1:22).