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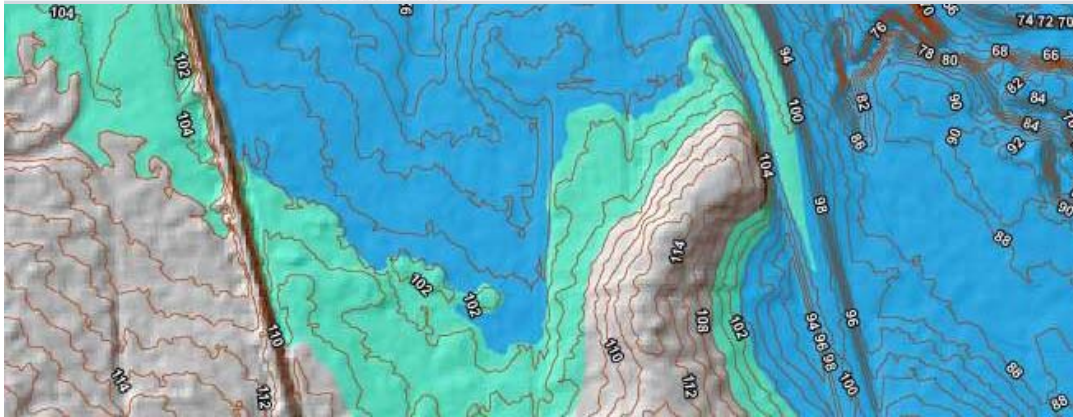
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Civil engineering firms have been hit hard by the economic downturn. In many areas, development has slowed to a trickle, leaving many design and planning firms struggling. In an environment like this, it is essential for these firms to operate productively, and the key to productivity is building a team of people who love their jobs.

By Anthony Zuena, P.E.

Professional development and values-based management can answer employees' three crucial questions.

Civil engineering firms have been hit hard by the economic downturn. In many areas, development has slowed to a trickle, leaving many design and planning firms struggling. In an environment like this, it is essential for these firms to operate productively, and the key to productivity is building a team of people who love their jobs.

It may sound like a tall order—and it can be—but building such a team is vital to success. Organizations need to create an environment in which the company values its people (and demonstrates it) and the people value the company. When such an environment exists, people want to come to work, they are more productive, and they stay with the company for the long haul.

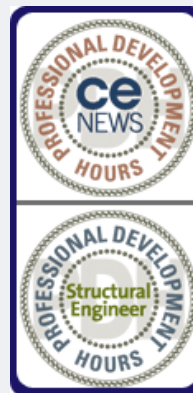
So how do you create this environment? Start with three crucial questions that employees ask themselves:

1. **Is this a place where I can achieve my personal goals?** Engineers do important work, and most derive great satisfaction from that. However, not every employer provides adequate opportunity for employees to grow as professionals. Engineering firm leaders should recognize this and focus on employees' professional goals and the development of future leaders when developing corporate mission statements.
2. **Is this a place where I can earn a living?** Engineers and other staff are more productive when they aren't looking over their shoulders and wondering if the axe is going to fall. That's why it is so important to be open and honest with employees about the health of the organization. This is especially important today, as many engineering firms are struggling.
3. **Is this a place in which I want to invest?** Success requires that a company invests in its staff, but employee investment in the company is equally important. By demonstrating consistently a commitment to employees, organizations can foster reciprocal commitment. If engineering firms are going to thrive, they can't afford to have staff just going through the motions.

Cover Story

11th Annual CE News Salary Survey

The economic uncertainty that loomed on the horizon early last year came into clearer view late in 2008 and early in 2009. And it's an ugly vision. Although the civil engineering profession has not been devastated as much as other industries, it has not escaped unscathed. Cracks in many firms' traditionally solid salary, bonus, and benefits programs are evident in the results of the **CE News** 11th Annual Salary Survey, a snapshot of civil engineers' compensation taken earlier this year.



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Employers have it in their power to influence the answers to these questions through the way they manage their organizations. Different organizations have different approaches, but the most successful focus on professional development and values-based management.

Professional development and team building

Every member of the organization should have the potential and opportunity to run it some day. That may sound unrealistic, but the point isn't to create the expectation that everyone will eventually run an organization. Rather, companies should provide every opportunity for employees to excel. This provides two benefits: It promotes employees' satisfaction with their jobs and companies; and it leads to development of the next generation of corporate leaders.

The cornerstone of professional development is training. Every engineer needs to participate in regular training programs to keep up-to-date in professional knowledge and industry developments. Most successful engineering firms support their employees' ongoing training.

In addition to outside training, employers also should consider sponsoring frequent in-house training events in which staff member present work that they have done and outline challenges and how they were overcome. The idea is to familiarize employees with the full scope of work at the firm and to give staff a chance to see how colleagues address common challenges. These presentations provide the added benefit of promoting team building. When staff members work together to solve challenges, they begin to rely upon one another, and they learn how to successfully work together.

Yet, if the goal is to create future leaders, training like this isn't enough. Successful leaders require many skills, including an understanding of the business, the ability to manage people, and the ability to manage the firm's finances. The first two can be learned over time as employees advance through the company and are exposed to good leaders. However, the financial side of leadership must be taught directly. The best way to do this is to provide employees access to the organization's financials. Most firm administrators will shudder at the thought of opening up the books to employees, but the only way to help people understand how and why financial decisions are made is to let them watch the decision-making process as it happens.

This level of transparency has an added benefit of demonstrating to employees that the organization's management is open and honest with the entire staff. This, of course, also fosters successful team building within the organization.

In addition to professional development, firms can build stronger teams by encouraging social interaction both at and outside of the office. Such activity can increase team members' enjoyment in working together.

Reflecting employees' values

As professionals, we spend more than half of our waking hours working, and employees are more motivated when they work someplace that reflects both their personal and professional values. Employees don't just want to be proud of the work they do, they also want to be proud of the company they work for. In addition to enhancing employee productivity, focusing on organizational values can also help attract new clients and solidify relationships with existing clients.

There are several ways to establish corporate values that appeal to employees. Many companies support charitable causes by making donations in the names of staff or clients. This is an excellent way to make staff feel that their company is making a difference. There are also more hands-on ways to support good causes. For instance, firms can permit employees to donate time and expertise to charitable projects, either as weekend projects or during work hours. Many companies partner with groups such as Habitat for Humanity to build homes for low-income families.

As engineers, we are uniquely positioned with specialized skills that can be used to make a difference and benefit others. For instance, groups such as Engineers Without Borders, a non-profit international humanitarian organization, provide opportunities to help people send staff to less developed parts of the world to apply their expertise on important projects. This sends a message that the organization is committed to making a difference—and provides extraordinary professional development opportunities to those who participate.

But establishing organizational values isn't just about charitable support. It's also about good corporate citizenship, which is an integral part of the organization's day-to-day mission. For instance, sustainability can be a perfect cause for engineering firms to promote through their work with clients. By incorporating environmentally friendly elements into their designs and planning projects, firms can establish themselves as forward-thinking organizations that make a difference every day. This is something that both staff and clients will appreciate.

Promoting productivity

Today, at a time when many engineering firms are suffering from the effects of a faltering economy, it's essential that organizations operate productively and efficiently. By building organizations that reflect the values of employees, promote professional development, and emphasize team building, firm leaders can create vibrant, positive, and productive workplaces.

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