

Success Stories

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Building Communication

A Virginia-based construction company uses strong communication skills to move forward.

BOWA Builders values communication. That might actually be an understatement. The McLean, Virginia-based construction company with 81 employees is in constant communication with its employees and uses the latest technology tools to do so.

BOWA was founded in 1988 by Larry Weinberg and Josh Baker, college friends who saw a need for a professional construction company serving Northern Virginia, suburban Maryland and the District of Columbia. Their commitment to their employees and their clients made them extremely successful and earned them a Best Bosses award for 2005.



Weinberg, the CEO, thinks BOWA's strengths lie in company-wide communications. The company has 26 different construction sites and one of the biggest challenges is keeping all employees updated. Management at BOWA works hard to solve this problem. A daily email goes out to all employees with news, events, and even the lowest gas prices in the region and groups have daily "huddles" on-site and in their office to discuss news, hurdles and roadblocks that employees or groups face. Workers on-site have at least one laptop at each site and there is a company-wide intranet to keep the lines of communication open.

Weinberg has a "site lunch" every Friday to meet with different workers, catch up, and get feedback. Through these lunches he learned that the Hispanic workers had a hard time understanding their health benefits because the technical jargon confused them, which led to a company switch to an insurer that was friendlier to Spanish-speakers. Weinberg also learned Spanish to better communicate with employees.

Renee Schroder, a staff accountant, decided she wanted to work for BOWA after reading their rave reviews "all the time" in Southern Living magazine. Schroder likes BOWA because "they value their employees and their clients. They stand by their work. Clients come back." Schroder confesses she works too much, but her response to anyone encouraging her to take time for herself is "if I wasn't happy I wouldn't be here."

The core values at BOWA are "Heroic customer service, continual self-improvement, integrity, hard work in a fun atmosphere, and sharing the success." BOWA even goes so far as to honor an employee who best demonstrates them every quarter. Other distributed awards include an award for the employee whose suggestion box feedback is most utilized, and a craftsmanship

award. Every January the quarterly meeting, a dinner held at an upscale local establishment, resembles something of an awards show and is a reunion for many employees who don't get to see each other on different worksites.

Heroic customer service is extremely important at BOWA. They stand by every one of their projects and have a paging system that keeps a superintendent on call 24 hours a day, year round, in case problems arise with anything they build. The system rotates every few weeks so superintendents spend less than a month on call each year.

BOWA is a company that continually looks toward the future. Jim Little, the Chief Knowledge Officer, says a big difference between other construction companies is that "The executive team spends a huge amount of time engaged in long-range planning and creates both short-term and five-year business-development plans. They even have a twenty year plan. It's a nice vision of the future."

Michael Martin, a project manager, was self-employed for years but decided to work at BOWA because of the quality of their work and the advanced woodworking he could do there. The difference between BOWA and other construction companies was striking. "People love coming to work. At other places there aren't enough holidays or vacation time. Here they don't encourage you to work weekends, they want you to take time for yourself." He also found a team concept he'd never experienced before: "Tons of support from everywhere. It's unbelievable."

Management at BOWA realizes that happy employees are productive and shows their commitment to employees in many different ways. Family and non-work life are serious considerations: employees can schedule flexible hours with their managers and employees are encouraged to take time for themselves, which is not the norm for the intense work schedules at construction companies. BOWA even offers four weeks of unpaid leave annually to allow employees to travel and keep their benefits, which is especially helpful for workers from other countries that travel home for holidays. Little says this helps in employee retention: "It's unusual to find these benefits available elsewhere. People rarely choose to leave."

When asked how he created an environment that is given such rave reviews by employees, Weinberg offered this advice "Take a long term view. Culture is hard to change and reverse. If you start down the right path it will take infinitely less effort. That's why we had our core values: we were trying to get the right culture in the beginning, when we were small and didn't have a lot to offer our employees."

Web site: www.bowa.com

Industry: General contracting

Location: McLean, VA

Employees: 81

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