

TALK WITH THE BOSS



TRACY BOULIAN | THE PLAIN DEALER

Company endures without downsizing

MARCIA PLEDGER | PLAIN DEALER REPORTER

Dominic Ozanne has been president and chief executive officer of Ozanne Construction Co., Inc. in Cleveland since 1990. Ozanne, founded in 1956 by Ozanne's father, Leroy Ozanne, has 60 employees. Projects include building and designing schools and universities, hospitals, correctional institutions and housing developments. These are excerpts from a chat between Ozanne and Plain Dealer reporter Marcia Pledger.

The Question: What is your leadership style?

The Answer: Hands-on. I try to lead by example. I keep close track of the status of projects and often visit construction sites because, in our industry, clients expect to see the boss. If there are any significant issues or concerns, I will address them myself.

The Question: Does that mean you're a controller?

The Answer: Not at all. Only six people report directly to me. Periodically, project managers come to our weekly meetings. In order to grow and be effective, you have to give your team members authority to make independent decisions. Otherwise you will fail to attract competent people. You have to empower employees if you want to offer a consistent and quality product. No one person can do it all.

The Question: What top two traits do you look for in hiring managers?

The Answer: No. 1 is character, which includes trustworthiness, loyalty, honesty and a good attitude. No. 2 is being technically proficient. What we do is very challenging, so you have to have a cross section of complementary skills. But I learned early on that you should never judge a book by its cover.

The Question: It's been a rough year for construction. Have you had to make difficult decisions regarding staffing?

The Answer: We generally work on contracts that extend over several years. Therefore, we were more worried about 2010, not 2009. In order to adjust to the downturn, we sought to expand to the [U.S.] Gulf region. We have not had to lay off people. In fact, we're looking for people.

The Question: In a tough economy, do you encourage people more to think outside of the box or let them know in some way that their opinions matter?

The Answer: Annually our project managers, project executives, superintendents and administrative staff get performance reviews. Part of that process includes asking how our company can improve. We're looking into developing a wellness program now as a result.

The Question: How important is training to you?

The Answer: We invest in training and technology at every level in order to maintain an edge. We don't just support training, we mandate it. It's critical for cost management, safety, project and schedule management.

The Question: Who gave you your best career advice, and what was it?

The Answer: My accounting 101 professor at Boston University, Professor Weatherbee. He said: Remember, you always want to make sure you keep an eye on your accounting. It's a simple statement. But it's profound. And it applies to your personal life and business. You can forecast aggressively, but accounting is truth. If you're making X and you're spending X plus four, you're not going to make it.

The Question: Do you believe it's important to have a corporate mission, vision or sustainability program.

The Answer: Ozanne has adopted John Elkington's "triple bottom line" definition, which tracks social, economic and environmental sustainability. An economic example: On a daily basis, we track work-force demographics and minority and female contracting percentages. For environmental: We have nine LEED-accredited professionals on staff, which is a pretty high number for a company of our size.