



“ The only way to really grow is to take on something totally new and unfamiliar. ”

NO. 8: COMMIT TO ONGOING EDUCATION

STEP (OR HIKE) OUTSIDE YOUR COMFORT ZONE

Editor's Note: *Following is the last part of our eight part series called, "Better Next Year," by Fred Ode, CEO, chairman and founder of Foundation Software.*

This summer, I let go of familiar.

In response to my body's need for a physical challenge and my brain's demand for mental clarity, I took off on a solo backpacking trip through the Appalachian Trail. In just over two weeks, I covered more than 140 miles in Virginia and Tennessee and dropped twelve pounds along the way. I also went for days without showering, endured several severe thunderstorms and slept outside alone (except for the mice and other wild creatures I heard in the night).

Was it worth it? Absolutely. By stepping outside of my comfort zone, I was able to reach a new height of accomplishment. I felt stronger, more

capable and (dare I say) younger. Best of all, I learned an invaluable lesson: The only way to really grow is to take on something totally new and unfamiliar.

Now, I am not suggesting that everyone needs to go to such extremes for personal and intellectual growth. But everyone, regardless of who they are, needs to continue learning and improving, or they're done. In order for your construction business to grow and avoid extinction, you must push yourself and your employees beyond the familiar.

I've met many contractors over the years who are "doing well" and who know how to do their jobs because they've been at it for a long time. Having reached a certain level of

Better Next Year— An Eight Part Series

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accomplishment, however, many slip into cruise control and feel no need to fix what isn't broken. Yes, it's easy to get stuck in our comfort zone, but it can be costly, too. When we limit our learning, we limit the possibilities for new opportunities and growth.

Learn to Strengthen Your Weaknesses

The first step to ending complacency involves taking stock of your strengths and weaknesses, both on a personal and organizational level. To be better in your job, and to make your company better, the greatest challenge is to improve in your weakest areas.

With an honest and humble approach, you need to ask yourself the tough questions: "What am I avoiding or putting off due to a lack of comfort?" and "What areas make me feel incompetent or uneducated?" Then force yourself to learn or accomplish something new on a regular basis. Finally, put your employees to the same test. As you each experience the new rewards that come from stepping outside your "zone," it becomes easier and easier to do.

Learn to Accept New Technology

One area that clearly exists outside many contractors' comfort zones has to do with technology. And mainly, fear is what holds us back—fear of learning something new, fear of having to work harder to learn, fear of failure, fear of feeling dumb or fear of changing comfortable routines. Regardless of the reason, when fear influences how we approach our jobs, it affects the bottom line.

Whether we like it or not, technology is all around us, and it isn't going away. Something as simple as e-mail, for example, is the way business

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operates and communicates today. A contractor who refuses to use e-mail, therefore, is simply undermining his company's ability to compete.

Because technology can appear overwhelming, it sometimes takes baby steps to adapt. Contractors need to focus first on what is useful and pragmatic for their business and ignore everything else. Next, they need to initiate a plan for learning what best fits with their company and their employees.

Above all, business owners need to commit to ongoing technology training and education for everyone. Without the full support of management, fear of technology (in its many forms) will ultimately shut down the learning process.

Learn to Be a Newbie

Remember when you were young and learning something new brought a rush of excitement? Back then, learning was fun and inspirational because you approached life as a student.

Today, however, you are a professional with years of work experience and skills under your belt. Admitting that you need to learn something new is often hard to grasp for people who have reached the top of their game. But it's also what holds us back.

In Barbara Sher's book, *Its Only Too Late if You Don't Start Now*, she writes, "You can learn new things at any time in your life if you're willing to be a beginner. If you actually learn to like being a beginner, the whole world opens up to you."

For construction business owners,

committing to ongoing education is the last, and perhaps most important, ingredient to becoming better next year. The key is to step outside your comfort zone, strengthen your weaknesses and approach life as a brand new student. This approach to learning makes you a leader, because you are sending the message that learning never ends. It is, in fact, the only way to keep yourself and your business growing and expanding.

Imagine feeling stronger, more capable and younger in business—much like my backpacking experience made me feel. Why wouldn't you challenge yourself to learn and grow if both you and your business are guaranteed to benefit from this newfound clarity? We can all be *better next year* by continuing to change and challenge the status quo. ■



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