



## Today's Topic:

# “One Company, One Team” in the Construction Industry

### Guest Speakers:

Lee Johnston, VP of Human Resources, Holder Construction  
Alex Villanueva, Director of Training, Holder Construction

### Facilitator:

Hal Adler, Senior Consultant, Great Place to Work® Institute, Inc.

**A unified mentality can tie employees together and create a sense of pride that nurtures an organization into a great workplace.** At Holder Construction, a commercial construction company based out of Atlanta, Georgia, the motto, “one company, one team”, helps to bridge the gap between various locations and roles to create a solid body of contributors and maintain consistency throughout the organization. Recognized for the past three years as one of the *50 Best Small and Medium Companies to Work For* (this year ranked as the #2 Medium Company), Holder Construction has leveraged this idea to build a truly great workplace for its approximately 330 employees. On July 12, 2006, Lee Johnston and Alex Villanueva joined Hal Adler and a group of peers to discuss how the organization has integrated unity and consistency into creating a strong company culture and successful business.

## A Different Priority

When Lee and Alex talk about their experience at Holder Construction, they emphasize the idea that business decisions are made with employees as a high priority. As an example, Lee explained, “In our industry, it’s very normal that you will go out and pursue work first and then figure out how you’re going to staff those projects. We have a team of people who look at both the business development opportunities and the associates in our company, and part of that decision-making is that we get opportunities to build all over the country, and if we don’t have associates who are willing to relocate for us, then we can’t meet those commitments.” On the front end of every prospective job, the team looks to the people primarily before taking on a project that may not be the best fit for the associates. When they do choose to relocate for a project, it is with the attitude that they will “fly the Holder flag,” as Lee described, and represent the organization well. This decision-making process demonstrates to Holder Construction employees that they are the drivers of business decisions, rather than sheer volume of projects. The associates are valued individually for their contributions that add to a project’s success.

With the reality that employees are spread out throughout the country, Lee takes the “one company, one team” motto seriously. She is firm that location-specific employees are not treated any differently than long-tenured employees; this consistency shows in tangible ways like benefit packages, but also in regard to equality in roles and high expectations for effort and quality. Associates are hired with the hope that they will stay with Holder Construction, so cultural fit is as much a qualification as job skill. While turnover is a challenge that faces all firms in the construction industry, Lee believes that these practices have paid high dividends to Holder Construction, especially in the form of decreased turnover each year. Alex added that maintaining a similar work environment across various locations has become an emerging need, and she described “entire meetings dedicated to operational consistency.”

## **Training Leads to Growth**

It may seem that basing business development decisions on current staffing could hinder the organization's growth, but Alex explained that at Holder Construction, there is a strong push in recruitment and internal training. The organization has great relationships with several universities and a successful internship program, all with the objective of “bringing in new talent that's a good cultural fit”. Once associates are brought on board, there are various training and development opportunities, stemming from the philosophy that “success over the years has come from having ‘our kind of people’ out on projects,” Alex stated. Holder Construction's goal of training internally prepares associates to take on future projects and thereby nurture organic growth of the company. This approach is proactive, living out from the philosophy of Tommy Holder, CEO: “The project managers of the future are already on our payroll.” According to Alex, it is a much faster process to train people internally to develop skills that will be needed in the future, rather than seeking out new employees.

Holder Construction's core training curriculum arose from gathering input from engineers and other field employees regarding the skills that are needed to manage projects, taking into account differing roles and work environments. The training team took the time to identify these topics and create materials to train associates in “the Holder way”. The end result incorporated front-line employees' ideas and concerns, rather than a set of materials with ideals imposed from management. In addition to the main training path, Holder Construction asks its employees what they need to become better equipped for their jobs. In one instance, as Alex described, associates asked for training around a specific program focused on creating sustainable and environmentally friendly buildings. While the Human Resources team was aware of this program, it was the request of the employees that drove the development of this training opportunity. Associates had the chance to become trained and accredited, and in addition, the program was offered to interns for their development. “We wanted to show that we cared for the interns as people, and not just temporary employees,” Alex explained. This interactive and highly-applicable approach to training has contributed to Holder Construction's growth and success, and they currently enjoy a rate of 80% repeat business, which is rare for this industry.

## **Leadership and Culture**

In the journey to becoming a great workplace, Holder Construction's progress is in part due to the strong position that leadership has taken in creating this environment. As Lee explained, “It all starts at the top. You have to know our CEO and some of our leadership team to know how much relationships are part of their lives. A lot of the time we talk about teamwork, but we take teamwork both internally and externally, our partners, our subcontractors, our owners, our associates, and that, with our culture, is truly the essence of the things we hold near and dear.” The core values of the organization have existed for longer than Lee or Alex can remember; the leadership team leads by example to exhibit consistent behaviors, like telling stories about the company in the culture, participating in classes about the values, and holding fellow employees accountable to upholding the core values. Instead of being lofty or detached from the employees, the leadership team takes responsibility for an associate who may not be as willing to adopt and participate in this culture. The team believes that “their [the employees]” failure is our failure,” and a member of the team will step up and work with the employee. The Holder Construction leadership team is integral to this philosophy and to preserving a consistent culture of accountability and unity.

The leaders' example of respect for fellow employees and outside interactions has trickled down to the frontline employees, creating a pervasive culture of respectful interactions. Lee said, “Despite how they may be a little rough around the edges, they know that our associates and the people that we deal with, whether internally or externally, there's a way we treat those folks, and they take that to heart.” This expectation of supervisors to preserve their culture results an environment that is both enjoyable and sustainable as well as a source of pride.

When asked how an organization could go about making the change toward becoming a great workplace and obtaining buy-in, Lee recommends:

- **Having conversations** with senior leaders; change starts at the top.
- **Identifying what is preventing the organization from becoming a great workplace**, which will inform a future strategy. Ask: Is trust lacking? Are our methods of communication effective?
- **Finding out strengths and areas of potential improvement:** Brainstorm ideas and ask your employees: What is working well? What is not working well?
- **Defining your culture** by finding out what is meaningful to your employees. Ask: How do you see this company? What does this culture mean to you?

## **Conclusion**

Lee believes that as a result of taking action to becoming a great workplace, Holder Construction has become a kinder, gentler place to work, in addition to the more visible financial gains. She says that recognition from the *50 Best Small and Medium Companies to Work For* is a reinforcement of the pride that employees already have in their workplace. The “one company, one team” motto has underlined business decisions, training and development, and ultimately, personal interactions and relationships for employees. Despite what may be a historically difficult industry to achieve a great workplace, Holder Construction has set a high standard in teamwork, consistency, and values.



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