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Throw Rules Out Window - DPR: Construction Firm Bucks Conventional Rules

by SUSAN HAUSER

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If DPR Construction, Inc. had formal titles, which it doesn't, David Aaroe figures he'd probably be a project executive. If there were bosses, which there aren't, Aaroe's boss would probably be Jim Kilpatrick. At any rate, if the company had private offices, which it doesn't, Kilpatrick would probably have the corner window office.

It sounds confusing, but it's not. Titles and window offices fall under the category of "conventional thinking," and you must banish such a thing from your mind the moment you enter the airy, eighth-floor space at 520 S.W. Yamhill St. If the open-cubicle, few-straight-lines design didn't give it away, you'd soon get the idea that DPR Construction marched to a different drummer when you saw the nameplates on the conference and meeting rooms.

They're all named after Northwest icons: the spotted owl, the New Carissa, Bhagwan, Keiko, D.B. Cooper and Harry Truman. (You know, our Harry Truman of Mount St. Helens fame.) That kind of fun-spirited irreverence falls right in line with the company's values, says Aaroe, 43.

"The first thing the founders did was establish the culture of the company," he says. That was in 1990 in the Bay Area, when it was cool for dot-coms to have egalitarian, creative work structures. Most construction companies, however, were sticking to a timeworn hierarchy.

By the time DPR established its Portland branch in 1997, self-motivated engineers sought employment where anybody could be boss and were they were rewarded for initiative and imagination.

The company strives to "empower people, give them responsibility and authority," Kilpatrick says. Thus, employees are encouraged to try their hand at many roles. Equal education and training is given to all, so job swapping is an ordinary occurrence.

"We don't want a hierarchical organization with a lot of punitive rules that hobble creativity," Aaroe says.

Employees can take brain breaks by wandering down to the wine bar area, where a foosball game awaits players at all hours of the day. A fully stocked wine cellar becomes the focal point on Friday afternoons, when family members can participate in the week's winding down.

"A lot of camaraderie has developed here," Aaroe notes.

DPR Construction specializes in building telecom and health care facilities, but recently has renovated and built an addition for the Newberg City Hall and constructed student housing at Lewis & Clark College.

Aaroe says it's not all fun and games, but the employees are so enthusiastic about their work that they require minimal prodding. "You just need to provide leadership and mentoring. You don't need rigid guidelines."

It was in 1992 that author and consultant Jim Collins ("Build to Last"), then a Stanford business professor, helped DPR's founders articulate the company's vision and values. The core values they settled on were enjoyment, uniqueness, integrity and "ever forward."

Aaroe says it's no accident that enjoyment is listed at No. 1. "Employee satisfaction is a huge factor for us," he says.