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DPR Construction Places Customer First - 2001 Austin Business Awards

Customer Service: Medium Business Category

by GREG NARAG

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Gary Nauert is the regional manager for the Austin division of DPR Construction Inc., an 11-year-old construction company with 18 offices around the country.

He is quick to point out, however, he is uncomfortable with attaching a title to his name, saying "Our business cards don't have titles."

He is speaking from a phone in an open area surrounded by fellow coworkers. There are no offices. He says this encourages teamwork and collaboration among all employees.

"We don't want to be a bureaucratic entity," Nauert says.

His language about the company is punctuated by references to "core values" of "integrity," "empowerment" of employees and "accountability."

This is just one example of DPR's unique corporate culture. It's a culture consciously and intentionally created and continually reinforced.

Nauert emphasizes DPR Austin adheres to a special set of standards in how business is conducted, all with a focus on serving customers.

DPR's business is construction and general contracting for all manner of projects. Started in 1994, the company covers a niche in the Austin area for specific types of projects, including corporate offices, microelectronics and health care facilities.

According to Nauert and associate Diane Shelton, DPR Austin worked from its beginning to incorporate the national company's lofty goals, defined in a series of company mission statements. Among them are "to be one of the most admired companies by 2030" and "to build a truly great construction company by 2000."

DPR Austin in particular took these goals to heart. The Austin staff determined that achieving the goals would have to be intimately tied to an approach to customer service that could be considered unusual in the construction business.

"All these clients have a choice. They can go to whomever they want," Nauert says. "It's a real competitive market, so we have to be self-correcting. If you keep doing the same things the same way day in and day out, you're gonna be extinct."

He also knew repeat business would factor heavily in DPR's credibility and success. Customer satisfaction had to be top priority.

A sign on a wall of DPR's Austin office reads, "Listen to the client, become the client." This is where it begins, Nauert says.

From the inception of a new project, DPR project managers meet with clients and establish a personal relationship. DPR engages in all the activities that would typically be expected of a construction firm, including project planning, establishing schedules and budgets and hiring subcontractors. DPR also incorporates other practices to ensure the notion of customer service avoids becoming a platitude.

All personnel, from senior management to site superintendents and subcontractors, are introduced to the DPR culture and its expectations in quality and performance. DPR offers more than 30 training classes and seminars throughout the year, 12 of which are mandatory. Topics include current best practices training, OSHA standards, safety and injury-free environment classes, project scheduling, sexual harassment awareness and even a specific module on DPR culture.

Before vendors and subcontractors are allowed on a project, they, too, learn about DPR procedures.

"It's a pretty formal plan," Nauert says.

An initial schedule for a project is presented, then updated at least every three weeks. In that way, everyone involved in the project is reminded of what is expected. In addition, DPR can quickly spot and correct any problems.

The DPR approach to measuring its results helps to keep it on the customer track.

The company constantly analyzes itself, using a variety of tools to scrutinize its own performance. Clients receive customer satisfaction surveys, but they don't have to wait until after a project is completed to sound off on how they think the work is going. "Face-to-face" surveys are conducted during and after the project, giving clients the opportunity to give immediate feedback and progress can be monitored.

Whenever improvement is needed, the company develops training programs to educate employees.

"We saw on a national basis customers saying the schedule was more and more important. Everyone wants a fast delivery date," Nauert says.

DPR has not had trouble meeting deadlines, but recognizing this growing desire from customers, it developed a training program devoted to scheduling and planning. An outgrowth of this program is DPR's use of a "scheduling audit" taken frequently throughout projects to ensure timeliness.

DPR also uses its survey data in an effort to improve its practices.

The company hired a full-time employee dedicated specifically to that task. Known as the "Ever Forward Champion," the position also acts as a "quarterback" to seek out trends and identify areas needing improvement.

Nauert says an example of the seriousness of this effort is DPR's scrutiny of the notion of quality.

"Owners were not rating us 'best in class' on quality. We were close, but not at the top," he says.

The company instituted a quality checklist used from the start of a project through its finish. Also, daily inspections became a habit.

Current results indicate DPR has again raised the bar. The Austin division leads the company in quality, as measured by its "zero defects" ratings.

According to surveys, 40 percent of completed construction projects in Austin were finished with no corrective actions needed. The remaining 60 percent -- corrections entered on a punch list -- were completed within five days. This is highly significant, Nauert says.

"It's not unusual for contractors to go 60 days before finishing punch list items," Nauert says.

"We're leading the company in customer satisfaction," Nauert says. "We're doing a lot of things right in Austin."

The numbers seem to support him. In 2000, DPR Austin was involved in 19 new projects and earned \$130 million in revenue. The clients are high profile. DPR has completed a three-building expansion for Dell Computer Corp., expansion of a fabrication plant for Motorola Inc. and several projects for Seton Medical Center.

Glowing references have rolled in from VISA, Sun Microsystems Inc. and Pierpont Communications Inc., all of which have used DPR in Austin. Nauert says each one complimented DPR on high quality work, professionalism and the ability to complete work on time, even within a tight schedule.

Greg Narag is an Austin-based freelance writer.