

**GENERAL PRESIDENT'S REPORT
III**

**FOR INTERNATIONAL PRESIDENTS
GENERAL OFFICERS
AND LABOR-MANAGEMENT LEADERS**

**RANK & FILE CODES OF CONDUCT
CHANGING THE UNION WORKPLACE CULTURE
FOR MARKET RECOVERY**

**MARK BRESLIN
BRESLIN STRATEGIES INC.
www.Breslin.biz**

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INTRODUCTION

This document is provided as a strategic guide for the leaders of the union construction industry of North America. The contents are the viewpoint of the author only.

Circulation of these documents is for purposes of organizational policy discussions and examination of strategic options. Circulation includes the International General Presidents, General Officers and other leading labor & management leaders in North America.

This report is provided to stimulate discussion on strategic options to regain market share. The focus is on the establishment of rank and file codes of conduct and strategies to enact positive change within the union workplace culture.

THE UNION WORKPLACE CULTURE

The union workplace culture is one that suffers from both real and perceived problems.

Over the past decades many union workers have come to believe that there is a degree of entitlement that should be accorded them due to their union status. Thus unacceptable workplace practices have been tolerated and in some cases institutionalized as simply “the way it is”. This in practice has eroded the once positive image of the union worker as productive, highly skilled and cost-effective.

This has further resulted in a negative image for union construction workers. I believe that market forces today are making business decisions based on negative worker stereotypes that are no longer widely relevant but persist as obstacles in marketing, organizing and public relations.

The time has come to address these issues in a pro-active and non-compromising manner if the unionized construction industry is to survive.

BUSINESS BASICS: SUPPORTING THE PRICE POINT

Simply put every business or service has a “price point”; that cost at which the market will utilize it based on real or perceived value.

Our market problem: contractor & end-user’s perceived value, across vast areas in North America, does not support the price point of union construction worker compensation. Union construction services are, in most every case, more expensive on a cost-per-hour basis than the non-union counterpart. This should be expected and accepted by the market based on the tangible and specific value-based benefits associated with union construction worker skill and work ethic. But this is not the case.

In the vast majority of cases the value of union construction is vastly eroded by a belief that union construction workers are not only no better than their non-union counterparts, but that they bring excessive baggage to the workplace in the way of bad habits and attitudes. There is also a wide belief that the unions support, sanction or simply ignore these habits and attitudes.

CODES OF CONDUCT: AN INTEGRATED STRATEGY

Over the past year, I have been working with various crafts on the development and implementation of rank and file Codes of Conduct. These do not stand alone, but serve as an important part of their overall union Strategic Plans. It is very important to understand that these Codes are not simply about changing workplace habits and behaviors, but about re-positioning union construction in the minds and financial decisions of business decision makers across North America.

Codes of Conduct can be utilized for the benefit of both labor and management to grow market share; improve field performance; sustain or increase their price point; alter the workplace culture and solve a variety of other problems that are associated with these.

The key areas that I will be focusing on related to Codes of Conduct are as follows;

- Marketing & Organizing
- Workplace Culture & Performance
- Peer to Peer Accountability
- Union Resources & Politics

Marketing & Organizing

A union that implements a Code of Conduct has a very powerful business story to tell.

This story emphasizes the values that every successful business is built upon; accountability, performance and return on investment. A Code of Conduct, once implemented, becomes the primary message that is used to defeat old and negative images and stereotypes. A Code of Conduct conveys the following marketing & organizing messages from unions to the following audiences;

- **To Existing Union Contractors** = We are committed to providing you with a better product. We are getting our own house in order. Accountability and cost-effective field habits are important. We do not take you for granted.
- **To Non-Union Contractors** = What you've heard about us is incorrect. We guarantee performance. We are a modern progressive business partner. We are more expensive and worth it. We can support and even surpass your price point.
- **To General Business Community** = Unions are not what they used to be. Unions are performance driven organizations. Union leaders are doing the right things.
- **To End Users** = Labor and management are paying attention to our concerns. Labor and management are looking for ways to stretch my construction dollar. I can expect a true professional in or at my facility. Union construction is living up to its economic promise.

Marketing and organizing with this message is very important. Suggested tactics include:

- Development of brochures, DVDs and other collateral materials telling the accountability and performance story.
- Developing a contractor or end-user commitment brochure.
- Testimonials including commentary from end-users, union leaders, contractors and rank and file supporters.
- Press releases to business sections of newspapers and trade journals.

Workplace Culture & Performance

A Code of Conduct becomes the foundation of union workplace culture. It specifically identifies the attitudes and behaviors that are necessary and expected and directly takes on the old entitlement ideas of days gone by.

Key strategies for using this to change workplace culture include;

- Introduction to the Code on the first day of apprenticeship training.
- Consistent coverage in union magazines, bulletins and publications
- Reports at Union meetings on the frequency of use of the Code.
- Contractors reporting at apprenticeship courses or at the Union meetings on how worker attitudes and behaviors impact costs and competitiveness.
- Training on the values espoused by the Code of Conduct for positive attitudes and behaviors (see Breslin Strategies Survival of the Fittest apprenticeship & rank and file curriculum)
- Highlight success stories inside and outside of the organization.

One very important challenge to change the workplace culture; it must have very strong support at the top. Senior leadership must embrace the concept entirely or risk it being looked at as a short term fad. One union leader's response to these ideas was self-interested and financial, "...they even the shit-heads pay union dues too." While understandable, not acceptable.

To fundamentally change field attitudes and behaviors, it is going to take years. The commitment must be long-term, uncompromising and led from the top.

Peer to Peer Accountability

Without peer-to-peer accountability a Code of Conduct is worthless. The real change in workplace performance is not going to come about because of punishments to bad workers. Or foremen becoming more exacting in their expectations. Or contractors or business agents pushing the rank and file. No, long term, it is going to have to happen peer to peer, or not at all.

Many high performing organizations are self-monitoring in this way. Individuals within the organizations accept group norms on what is acceptable performance and what is unacceptable. When they recognize that management or leadership does not back the poor attitudes or behaviors of the marginal players or members, they become empowered to take action themselves. To directly address performance peer to peer. To state workplace expectations clearly. To demand more of themselves and those around them.

Over the past decades this has been lost. Complainers and marginal performers have not only been tolerated, but in some cases catered to. This has sent a demoralizing message to the field that breeds a "who gives a shit" mentality. A Code of Conduct, acted upon and believed in, by the rank and file, will be the most powerful tool in the transformation of the our industry's workplaces and competitive future.

Union Resources and Politics

Marginal performers may yet be the cause of death of the union construction industry. Any honest union leader will admit that over 75% of their personal time is spent on the

bottom 10% performers among their members. Probably 80%+ of labor-management contact is in regard to problems with these same individuals. Labor and management's joint relationships and resources are being consumed by these poor performers. No business enterprise can sustain itself by putting a primary focus on non-performing assets.

Every time one of these individuals goes to a jobsite or an end-user location, they re-enforce the stereotypes the market now believes. Every time they go out of the hall, they defeat our price point and break the union-value promise. In this way, they detract from both labor and management's ability to grow and thrive; because they do not possess the values, ethic and attitudes necessary to work in the profession.

And finally, not only can these individuals negatively impact the jobsite, but also their union halls and internal politics. It is no mistake that these same individuals tend to complain; delay or prevent necessary change; and create dissention within their local unions. This detracts from the union leader's ability to move his organization forward and do his job in the most effective and results oriented manner.

As such, a Code of Conduct that reduces the number and influence of this population may serve additional strategic value for labor leaders.

Summary

A rank and file Code of Conduct is not the "be all-end all" answer. It is another key strategy for labor and management to use to move the industry forward. A very small percentage of workers will ever be impacted by it directly, but what it represents to all the other workers, not to mention the contractors (union and non-union) and end-users should not be underestimated.

For marketing, organizing, and field efficiency it is truly something that has significant value. If you are in a position to begin implementation of a Code of Conduct, with the associated strategies outlined in this report, I would suggest that you take an assertive leadership role immediately.

The next G.P. Report IV will focus on increased focus and investment on supervisory training as a means to accelerate increases in market share, improve field performance and enhance our market reputation.

Mark Breslin, President
Breslin Strategies, Inc.
www.breslin.biz / mark@breslin.biz
925-829-1332

