

# THE FIVE SENSES OF THE SUCCESSFUL CONSTRUCTION PROFESSIONAL

**O**ver the course of twenty-five years, I have had the opportunity to meet and speak with more than my share of construction owners and industry professionals. Fascinated by what makes some highly successful while others simply average at best, I have casually watched the interactions of these individuals.

My point? Of the highly successful, I have repeatedly observed five similar traits, or senses if you will, that distinguish them from the rest. These senses go beyond the basic, measurable aspects of running a construction business. Most business owners, regardless of their industry, understand the importance of hiring the right people, utilizing technology or putting together processes and procedures to manage their business. The senses I am referring to are the intangible characteristics that transcend the basics and are not easily quantifiable.

Right, wrong or indifferent, I have come to some conclusions on the subject and welcome reader opinions and insight on my observations. If nothing else, this experiment may provide us all with a few good ideas.

## Numbers sense

The ability to intuitively know how you stand quantitatively is critical to success. For contractors, new jobs, expenses, margins, cash flow, jobs completed, profit by job, over/under billings, inventory, and

market conditions are just a few issues that are represented by numbers.

The most successful are able to sense when something is right or wrong without having to perform an in-depth analysis. When running a construction business,

there is too much activity to take large amounts of time to explore every possibility. Decisions must be made and chances taken.

The most successful can do this because they are able to take a “leap of faith” beyond detailed analysis and statistics and arrive at conclusions before it is too late.

## People sense

Great football running backs have a sense of where players are and, more importantly, where they are going to be. Great leaders in business also know their playing field. They understand all types of people, know how to adapt to different circumstances and adjust “on the fly.” Chameleon-like, they become what they need to in order to accomplish their goals.

This ability does not imply dishonesty in communications, but rather the ability to effectively relate to a multitude of personalities, motivations and circumstances when dealing with people. In construction this becomes very critical when dealing with the various people in your industry, for example employees, subcontractors, vendors, suppliers, architects, and clients.

## Product/Service sense

This may appear obvious, but there is a twist to product/service sense. It is common for individuals with excellent building skills to start their own construction business. Like an auto mechanic opening a repair shop, an electrician bidding on a

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job or a programmer writing a software package—all scenarios could lead to a new business venture. However, in order to be successful, you must also have the ability to perceive how your product or service offering relates to your target customer.

Similar to “If a tree falls in a forest . . . ?” product/service sense could pose the question as, “If a product or service is created for an imaginary customer, does the product or service exist?”

Past observations have proven that the product or service does not exist. In order to be successful in business, you must have a sense of product/service that includes your customer. Without the customer perspective, your product or service will simply be an empty shell.

### **Sense of opportunity**

Countless times, business owners credit much of their success to a combination of hard work and luck. However, luck is simply being ready for the right opportunity and acting accordingly.

The first sale that made a business or the chance meeting at the airport could all be attributed to luck. But the real question is “Are we ready when these opportunities arise?” Do we act quickly, decisively and correctly? Successful professionals do all of this. They are competitive by nature and have a winning attitude. They prepare and they move forward with the intent of winning the game.

Luck is simply opportunity seized.

### **Common sense**

The ability to step away and view a situation exempt from self-perception and the

immediate environment is common sense. From a creative perspective, this is referred to as “thinking outside the box.” From the practical perspective, this means being objective, calm, and rational, or “seeing the forest from the trees.”

Individuals that are able to separate themselves from the situation at hand, but keep full knowledge of the facts, are better able to make common-sense decisions.

All great managers have this ability.

### **The extra “sixth sense”**

Ok, I know the title states “the five senses of successful construction professionals,” but there is a by-product of the five base senses working in concert. I call this one the extra “Sixth Sense.”

This sense provides an instinctual ability to see the future, a characteristic true of only our greatest leaders. There are multitudes of successful construction professionals. However, true visionaries are rare.

Sam Walton of Wal-Mart, Bill Gates of Microsoft and Andrew Grove of Intel all have a sixth sense. They create institutions. Long after they are gone, their companies will flourish.

### **Conclusion**

Now that you have had a chance to reflect on these senses, put them to the test. Next time you attend a legislative luncheon or are networking at an association meeting, take notice of those professionals around you. Ask questions. Quietly observe. See the common traits. And don’t forget to learn from the best. ■