

Case Study #1

Improving Our Communities

An Intentional Shift in Culture

By William R. Whistler



Shook Construction office displays its vision, mission, and values. Photos in spread courtesy Shook Construction.



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Fair or not, there is a stereotype that persists in the A/E/C industries that a construction project is the crucible an organization must “get through” to realize their vision of a new or enhanced facility. But the truth is that a construction project can be an exciting, transformational—and positive—experience. For us, this experience naturally occurs as a result of our organization’s culture, a culture we’ve intentionally transformed, which has led to tremendous profit growth.

Having spent more than 40 years working for Shook Construction, I have witnessed how historically our organization has done a poor job of reflecting or expressing what makes us unique. To address this shortcoming, in the fall of 2017 we gathered a diverse group of thought leaders from across our organization and went through an extensive strategic-planning process. A key area of focus was an overhaul of our company’s vision, mission, and values.

Every organization has a culture, but not all cultures are defined. Nor are they all authentic or meaningful. Within the strategic-planning process, we scrutinized every word and comma to ensure the resulting statements—and, therefore, our culture—reflected our principles and ideals to which employees can feel connected. These words remind internal teammates that the work we do every day serves a higher purpose and dramatically improves the communities we serve.

From a Shift in Culture to a Shift in Profit

Our vision, mission, and values now adorn our office walls and marketing materials, but, most important, they have become a lexicon for how we describe ourselves. When a prospective client asks who we are, we don’t talk about the markets we serve or the geographies we work in. We talk about our core values and how they influence our actions every day.

Critics will challenge, “That all sounds great but at the end of the day, you can’t measure culture on a balance sheet.” In my opinion, that’s just wrong. In the two years since we’ve implemented this focus on culture, average sales are up 125%. Our bottom line is on a similar growth curve, and our win rate for project interviews has increased from 27% to nearly 50%. We’ve also seen fantastic retention rates with our people and have been effectively able to add talent that aligns with both our growth curve and culture.

The Challenge of Becoming Self-Aware

While a shift in culture requires time, it also requires an evolution in thinking, which can require coaching and training. Shook enlisted the help of Steve Anderson, Ph.D., MBA, owner of Integrated Leadership Systems, to do 360-degree reviews and regular, one-on-one coaching with each member of our



leadership team. Our goal was to improve emotional intelligence, be courageous enough to have difficult conversations with one another, and embody our core values in the way that we lead the organization.

Eventually we put three-fourths of the company through some version of this experience with Anderson, which bred shared understanding and alignment. Still, change is hard. The transformation taking place within our culture resonated with the overwhelming majority of the organization, but for a select few that wasn't the case. A critical part of fostering continued evolution was having the courage to make changes in the organization, even if they hurt in the short run, to ensure continued growth.

Making a Mission Global

Embracing our new mission led us to implement a program where every project of scale creates a community service event with our partners on the job. It also led us to Timisu, Bolivia, where, in the spring of 2019, Shook sent eight teammates on a mission trip to improve the water distribution systems for a remote village in the Andes Mountains (see photo above right). We see these types of service projects as living our vision, mission, and values, but we also see them as the natural output of our culture.

By going through a deliberate process to define and describe the words that define our culture, we're better able to share who we are and who we aspire to be. We use these values as a guide to navigate complex decisions and demonstrate what makes our firm unique. Our clients, partners, and employees connect with this message and their response is having a dramatic impact on our business. ■



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MISSION, VISION, AND VALUES

VISION: To relentlessly build a company so exceptional that the best talent and clients in the world pursue us.

MISSION: To dramatically improve the communities we serve.

VALUES:

Passion	This is not work; this is our calling. We enthusiastically collaborate to deliver incredible results.
Genuine	We have the courage to be vulnerable, self-aware, and humble. We openly communicate disappointments and share credit in successes. Respect, honesty, and fairness drive every decision we make.
Balance	We believe in personal and professional fulfillment. We promote a caring, inclusive culture that emphasizes family, community, and wellness equally with our work.
Fun	We find joy in our daily activities, express love for one another, and take time to enjoy the ride.
Courage	We support and inspire one another to take bold and calculated actions that benefit our employees, our clients, and the communities we serve.
Opportunity	We believe in the pursuit of dreams and our role in fostering growth. We provide the resources and autonomy to empower individuals to create fulfilling lives.
Responsible	We serve a higher purpose. We create safe and sustainable environments, give back to society, and celebrate diversity in our communities. We do so with the safety of all involved as our #1 priority.
Reliable	We do what we say. We deliver on our promises.