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Looking at construction management from an owner's perspective

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A lot goes in to taking a business model from concept to reality. Studies surrounding products, marketing and demographics, site selection and store design are all part of the complex process. In the end, though, it all comes down to engaging in the process of building the facility that will become the face of the company. Whether that business has one location or one hundred, each one matters. The customer's overall experience will be impacted by the general atmosphere of the building, the quality of workmanship, the lighting and air quality and many other factors. While a quality planning and design process is essential to this, it is up to the construction team to bring it all together.

At the heart of this process, from floor, to roof, to parking lot, are the construction manager and his or her team. This role is all the more important in the retail construction industry, where the projects are often very unique, as are the schedules and the work setting. Whether it's a matter of refitting a building for a first time proprietor, or building ground up for a national chain, the scope of work to be completed and the project's time constraints can often be complex and challenging. The successful completion of any project involves, in equal measure, firm control of costs, scheduling, and scope. The construction manager must have the skills, knowledge, qualifications and experience to bind the process together. He or she must be able to apply effective and innovative management skills to maximize team performance; and must also have strong knowledge of design/build/construction. In retail construction, it is also critical to have a thorough understanding of corporate practice, process and individual standards and how it impacts the project.

Generally speaking, a successful project must balance the project's scope, costs, and scheduling requirements, along with the owner's particular needs and any project constraints. Identifying those needs and constraints, as well as resource requirements, early in the project life cycle helps keep the project flowing smoothly toward a successful completion.

Everyone with an interest in any project can be best served by the construction manager taking on the viewpoint of the owner. By adopting this perspective, an emphasis is placed on the complete process rather than on the roles of a myriad of subcontractors. Specialized knowledge is, of course, very beneficial, particularly in large and complicated projects, but it's also important to understand how the different parts of the process work together. It takes coordination and communication among the various parts of the team to avoid excessive costs, waste and potential delays.

Retail construction, perhaps more than any other niche, requires a particular attention to small details. The facility often has a unique set of requirements to meet the owner's needs and the size of the project will often mean that a large and diverse team of specialists is required to bring the project to fruition. This requires strong leadership and precision planning. The construction manager must build a positive and open relationship between all members of the project team to assure a successful outcome.

Several key factors must be monitored carefully. Scheduling, for one, can be crucial to keeping the project on time and within budget. Things can get out of hand quickly if materials aren't onsite when they're needed, or one sub is held up because of something missed by another. The bigger, more complex the project is, the more critical this can be.

Being aware and respectful of your surroundings is also important. Whether work is being performed alongside other businesses that are operating at the time, or there is another project underway nearby; maintaining a high level of courtesy and professionalism is key.

Ultimately, it all comes down to a quality product. Large retail buildings are meant to be around for a long while and this durability is a function of several factors, including quality of materials and workmanship as well as appropriate design and planning, which includes taking in geographic considerations such as climate and other environmental factors when planning and choosing materials.

Today, it's a competitive environment for construction managers and general contractors. What sets one apart from the others is often a matter of having a solid combination of industry knowledge and people skills. You can meet all of your objectives on any given project but, if you haven't fostered good communication and a team mentality with the owners, architects, engineers and subcontractors along the way, you may not work with them again. In the end, it's not just about the job it's about relationships.

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