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May 2018
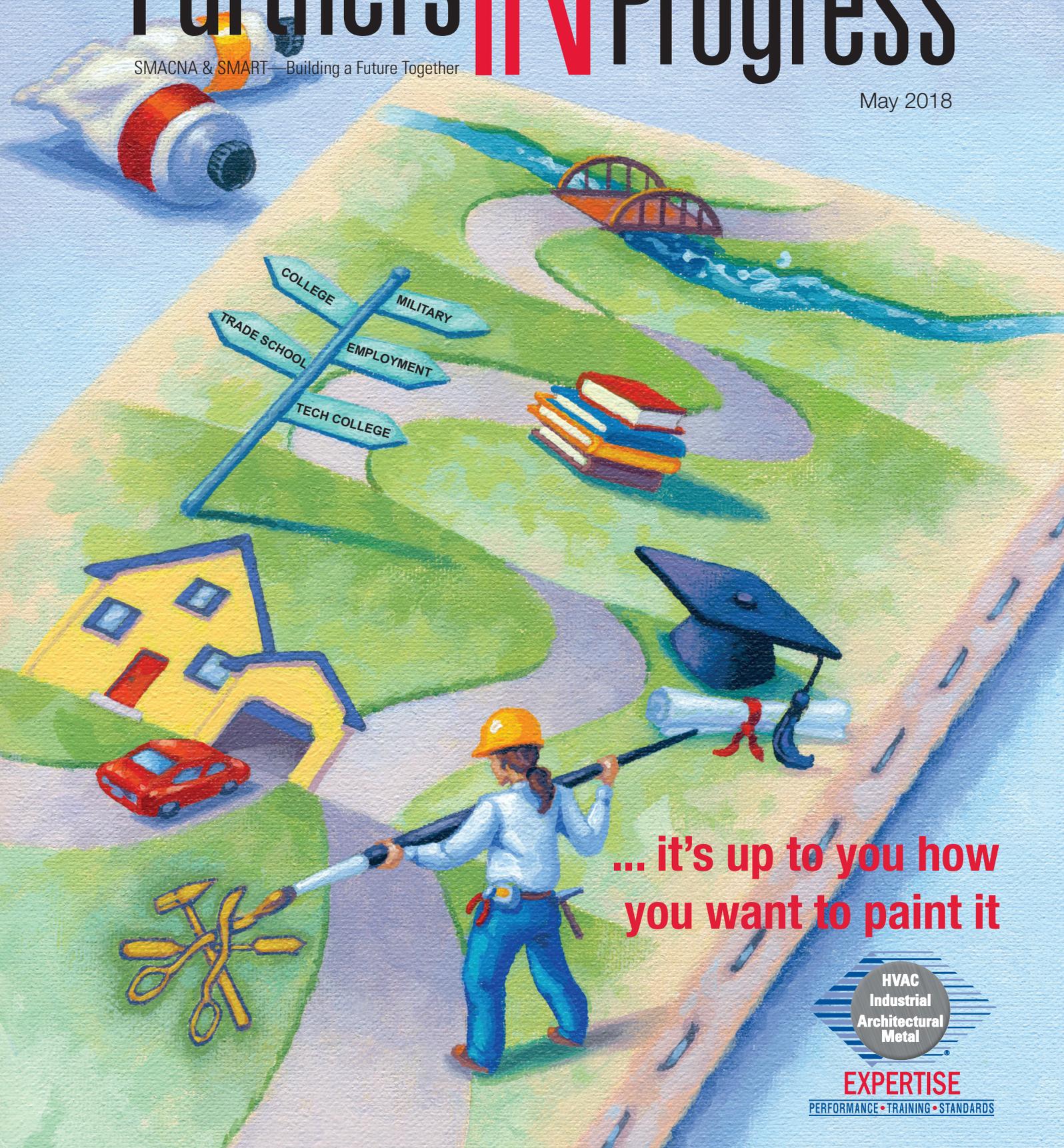
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COMMUNICATION REFORM
Driven by **Industry Demand**

By / Stephane McShane

The construction market seems to be evolving at a speed unmatched in history. The demands for collaboration, problem solving, and rock solid planning processes are driving changes in communication means. It is critical to address the cultural and operational hurdles – created by ineffective communication and conflict resolution skills – that can hinder the forward progress of your organization.

Today's construction industry and the clearly defined path forward include pull planning, multi-trade design and fabrication, modularization, and increasingly accelerated schedules. All of these items have one core value in common: collaboration. To accelerate the schedule, the industry is demanding that trades work together to solve problems more rapidly.

The era of the dictatorship model where the general contractor openly orchestrates every move is coming to an end in favor of the lean, team-engaged environment. This model thrives where input and active participation are held paramount. That said, it begs the question: How can we deliver a fully collaborative product to our external clients (those outside of our walls) if we don't have that same level of collaboration occurring with our internal clients (those inside our walls)?

In the world of construction, the lack of clear communication between management, staff, and the field is still common. The reason for its continuance cannot be, "It's been that way

for years." As quickly as we are seeing the delivery methods, design strategies, and operational plans evolve, so does the need to become very agile internally and leverage the strengths of many parties to meet the common goals of timeliness, safety, and profitability.

So, what causes a serious breakdown in communication and, ultimately, productivity and profitability? It could boil down to three very important factors: lack of defined roles and responsibilities, inconsistency in business practices, and poor culture.

Defined Roles and Responsibilities

Highly successful and progressive contractors understand the need for defined roles. To create a scalable, replicable model, each person in the organization must understand what their role is in generating a predetermined deliverable.

For example, if you took a hard look at your process that ends in a prefabricated assembly, skid, or product, how many people in your organization are involved in the success or failure of that product being done correctly, per design, on time, and on budget?

To have any sort of predictability of cost and timeline, it becomes necessary for each person in this chain of events to understand what information or product they receive, what they are expected

to do with it, and the expected outcome. If we have variances in the roles of those handling the submittal, purchasing, design, fabrication, logistics, or installation processes, the cost, quality, and timeline are unpredictable.

In this particular instance, the use of value stream mapping involving those parties who create or use the product (management and labor) would be recommended to define the process. This would include documenting each role and deliverable needed by each position in the workflow, to create the standardization, clarity, and lean transformation most organizations seek.

Consistency and Discipline

Consistency in business practices has everything to do with standards. Standards range from the soft skills such as how we do business, how we treat our clients (both internal and external), and what we stand for in the industry, to the hard skills of having defined systems and processes that set the stage for consistency and productivity.

An example of a lack of standards and consistency came from a consulting client that was creating installation drawings using the skill set of the foreman running the job as the barometer to dictate how much detail to place on those drawings. As a result, each job was designed to a completely different standard.

This is in stark contrast to those firms that have design levels standardized with specific detail about what is contained on the backgrounds, what extraneous information is removed, what level of information is created for field use in installing, and how this information flows through to fabrication. To determine what this process should look like, those involved in creating and using the information, both staff and labor, should be teaming up to define best practices. Only with consistency in standards, and the discipline to ensure standards are followed, can we reduce the friction and delays that come from the inconsistencies that exist in the organization.

Positive Culture

Culture plays a key role in the success of communication within a firm. The common pitfalls to culture are lack of structure, micromanagement, poor leadership, and lack of discipline. For example, working on improvement initiatives with a company with a positive, energetic, supportive culture allows those changes to become adopted and accepted at a significantly higher rate than those firms with a negative or distrustful environment.

Trust is the cornerstone of culture, and it must be seen at every level in the organization and exist between work groups.

A simple way to explore the overall culture of an organization is to test the relationship and trust that exists between project managers, superintendents, and field foremen. If that relationship displays trust, aligned vision, shared ambition, and a team spirit, then it is likely the culture of the firm is well intact.

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It might be said that this level of utopia does not exist in our industry. Perhaps perfection isn't the goal. The target moves daily, and organizations must be agile enough to respond. The goal of any organization should be to ensure its members are engaged, aligned in the vision of success for the company, and productive in working together to solve the many challenges ahead. The battle lines in the sand between departments, or "silos" within the organization should not exist. Management, labor, and staff should be focused in their efforts to attain common goals that support all parties.

As an industry, we face ongoing pressures regarding schedule, quality, and cost. The solution lies in a coordinated effort of defining roles, creating consistent deployment of business practices, that has a positive, supportive culture to ensure success for all. You cannot change an organization. You can positively change the culture and processes to benefit the people within the organization to gain the results desired. ▪

Stephane McShane is a director at Maxim Consulting Group in Denver. She has worked in the field as an apprentice, electrician, foreman, and worked her way through each operational chair within a successful electrical construction firm. She gave several presentations at the *Partners in Progress* Conference, including how to negotiate conflict, build teams, and develop critical communications skills. Download her presentations at *pinp.org/conferences/pinp18/schedule/*. For additional information about Maxim Consulting Group, visit *maximconsulting.com*.

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