



Solid strategy

As I see it **Barry Brad**

President & CEO, PROJEX

Barry Brad, president and CEO of PROJEX, which provides a full suite of engineering services to the Western Canadian energy market, started the Calgary-based company in 2000 based on a good idea and frustration with how services were deployed at that time. He sets the business landscape he entered: “We were eight years out from the 92/93 recession, the price of oil was nowhere near what it is now, demand was also substantially lower and competition was steep. We were going in with a good idea and a lot of ambition and energy to try and make a difference,” says Brad. “Engineering gets to be a little bit of a commodity, and some competitors had lost their focus on the customer. We thought we could do it better by focusing on our people, delivery to the client and trying to be best of breed.”

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From the outset, the firm's people strategy would be a foundational differentiator. But, then as now, the talent pool was tight. "There aren't enough engineers in the industry in Western Canada, and Alberta specifically," says Brad. "The biggest issue in our management discussions, and discussions with our board, is talent management and what we are doing about the supply of strong, capable talent to grow the business and meet demand," says Brad.

When the recession hit in 2008, PROJEX took the opportunity to re-engineer its people strategy. "We had done a lot of brand work to that point, but in the heated market that Alberta experienced from 2005 to 2008, it was very difficult to ingrain best practices and ask for higher performance levels when you couldn't find people," says Brad. "When the recession hit, we took that to heart and turned the organization upside down." In the last four years, PROJEX has made significant changes in its HR practice, in its management of talent, in the expectations of leaders and in how it deploys capital into its people. That re-engineering resulted in a heightened focus on fit, improved performance management systems that have in turn led to more transparency of what's expected from staff, and many more conversations and touch points between staff and managers to help them meet those expectations. As well, PROJEX has aligned its compensation system to performance in order to reward those employees performing at higher levels. "We had to downsize and that was the first opportunity to do some staff ranking and to really look at what we had to do to ensure we had the best talent aligned to our culture."

That culture is opportunities-based, customer-focused and performance-managed. "We are focused on customer

service and meeting or exceeding their expectations and developing a frictionless relationship. We have the organization aligned through performance management with cascaded goals all the way down, transparency and accountability," says Brad. "Our people management is based on opportunity. We provide the opportunities and the development. The company is there to support them and help them get to the next level, but they have a stake in the game, too. We have improved our communication strategy with quarterly 'all-hands state of the union' sessions outlining where we are, what we're doing, how we plan to get there, how we are going to evolve and what's in it for the employee. We've also improved our onboarding process and that includes new employee breakfasts to get them engaged sooner with the culture. The sooner they engage, the sooner they can see their career path in terms of opportunity and growth and that builds further engagement. As we grow, there will be more opportunities for the staff to grow."

The overall goal is to ensure that even in the tight labour market PROJEX is selecting and retaining the top end of the talent pool as it embarks on a steep growth curve. "The future looks awesome. It's to the point where we can't do all the work we could negotiate and win," says Brad. "But we are not going to put any more pressure on the local Alberta market for labour. Stealing or poaching from other firms in Alberta only puts added pressure on our clients. It's not sustainable. So we will be looking outside the province by setting up a satellite office in Halifax and pushing out work to them. The plan is to bring the oil sands to Halifax. We won't compete there. We have opportunities to find people who want to align with the lifestyle of the region and at the same time fit within our fast-paced entrepreneurial and performance-driven environment. There are a lot of incentives with the province of Nova Scotia to push jobs there. The strategy is solid and allows us to keep jobs in Canada. It's an exciting time."