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Hindsight With Rocky Geans of L.L. Geans Construction Co.



The ability to learn from our mistakes is one of the most important characteristics that set us apart from other animals. Yet, we often find ourselves repeating history. That's why this first in a series of "Hindsight" articles is so important ...[Continue >](#)



We're talking to leaders in the decorative concrete industry who are willing to admit to—as well as share—their past mistakes so that others might learn and benefit. As John Powell, the man who discovered the Grand Canyon, once said, “The only real mistake is the one from which we learn nothing.”

Our first decorative concrete contractor is Rocky Geans, president of L.L. Geans Construction Co. in Mishawaka, Indiana. L.L. Geans specializes in solving problems with unique solutions. A regular at the World of Concrete (WOC) since 1973, Geans says he's been known to attend the same seminar more than once because each time he learns new things and is able to apply that knowledge to other areas of his business. Geans was instrumental in developing the CEO Forums, another great way for concrete industry leaders to exchange ideas and information, for the American Society of Concrete Contractors. He also helped develop the Management Information Exchange (MIX) Groups.

Here are Geans' 10 Hindsight tips:

1. Estimating

Like everyone else, Geans says that he used to lower his bids for jobs when it was slow. Now that he understands the difference between hard costs (materials, labor, time, etc.) and markup or overhead recovery (cost of equipment and tools, operating costs, etc.) his approach is different. “Now I won't lie to myself about what the hard costs are,” he laughs, adding that if it's slow, he still may lower a bid, but he strives to at least cover a portion of the overhead.



Rocky Geans of
[L.L. Geans Construction Co.](#)





He's also more organized; he keeps better records and cost codes so that he can compare actual costs to budgeted costs to discover variances and determine how well he's bidding. After all, Geans adds, "We're in business to be successful, provide a good career for our employees, and make a profit." He says he also considers supply and demand; when a client asks him to drop everything to get something done, he charges accordingly.

2. Pricing

"Back when I first started, I wish I understood the difference between estimating and bidding," says Geans. Estimating, he says, is the science of arriving at exactly what a job will cost him, while bidding is the science of pricing jobs and getting the most profit he can out of each job. "When you compare cost to budget, if you're close, you're a good estimator," he adds. "It's an art." He also recommends keeping up with competitors and knowing how busy they are.

3. Managing employees

According to Geans, this is the biggest challenge for anybody in any kind of business today. As for his learning curve, Geans admits he used to be too nice to his employees and gave them too much freedom to come and go as they pleased. "Now, I help and coach them, but I also look at their performance and give them a chance to correct mistakes, otherwise I shake their hand and let them go out the door," he says. Geans keeps it simple; he's "firm, fair and consistent" with everyone across the board. He also says once he identifies good employees (those that care and work without hidden agendas), he makes sure the company takes care of them. "There is no company that can be successful without quality employees, and I like nothing better than to work with and reward employees who have the same goals and strive for quality and production," Geans explains.





He's also learned a few things about hiring and firing employees. "When I got rid of my problem employees, the business became better," Geans notes. As for hiring, in addition to using a personality test that he says indicates traits such as detail-oriented and people person, Geans calls references and asks open-ended questions in the interview. "I also have them use a shovel or form up a small slab in our yard, because seeing them work is the best way to know if they've got experience," he adds. He will also hire people on the basis of a "working interview" to provide both the new employee and the company an opportunity to see if it's a fit.

4. Managing facility/equipment

Though Geans used to let all his foremen load out themselves, he now has a load man who is one of very few with a key to the storage facility. "I started an inventory system and nothing walks away now," says Geans. "Everything is allocated to the job, so I also get a truer picture of my business."

5. Marketing/advertising

Although Geans says he would have implemented a strategic marketing plan early on, he was able to ask himself what he wanted to do and identify a niche to pursue. "Then I hit it and never let up on marketing," he laughs. "[You have to] focus on doing what you do best." He adds that marketing and advertising doesn't have to be expensive or involve a big advertising agency; he recommends keeping equipment clean and lettered, advertising on bus benches, maintaining a website, and, most of all, keeping a consistent look and feel with all forms of marketing/advertising.





6. Vendors/suppliers

Geans says there isn't anything he'd change in this area, but he does recommend a tip he utilizes. "For smaller jobs, I go to my ready mix supplier and ask them to treat all my little jobs for the year as one big job," he explains. "I commit all work under 50 yards to them, and in turn, I get better pricing." He says he also does this with various suppliers because "it's all about relationships."

7. Customer relations

Geans gives his customers a reality check by identifying customer expectations and matching them up with reality. "I give them all the information up front, and that way they're aware of problems that could happen...I learned that it's not up to me to decide what a customer can afford," says Geans.

8. Job site management

In addition to watching job sites a lot closer and visiting them more often, Geans says he also watched time more. "We have daily time cards now instead of weekly," he explains. "I also have start and stop times now, so there's never a question...[my employees] know that accuracy counts and that they must be accountable." Geans' motto, which he says his business coach coined, is simple; efficiency exposes weakness.





9. The big picture

“It’s a mistake to think you can just pour concrete and make money,” says Geans. “It’s important to understand business from the beginning; to get a consultant you trust; to take classes and educate yourself.” He’s also a big believer in processes, adding, “If you don’t have time for processes, you’re missing the point, because they will make your business better...even if you trust your employees but don’t have systems in place, you’ll never grow.”

10. Get a coach

“I had always talked about forming a board of advisors for our company but I never really did anything about it until the CFO of our ready mix company was retiring,” Geans explains. “I asked him if he would be interested in coming and helping out a couple of days a week... He is very supportive of doing what’s right, and keeping the focus on what it should be on. What a difference!” Though Geans says his coach is tough, he acknowledges “it’s only to help me, and I appreciate it.”

While Geans didn’t discover the Grand Canyon, we think he’s on to something—and the success of L.L. Geans proves it.





Sherpa info

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SUMMIT DATE

This document reached the summit (was created) on January 3, 2005 and is based on the best information available to the Sherpa at that time. To check for updates please click here <http://www.ConcreteSherpa.com/rockyhs>.

NAVIGATION & USER TIPS

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ABOUT THE CONCRETE SHERPA

The Concrete Sherpa is a team of people that represent the experience, teaching and learning of our team members and other industry leaders *on a mission to make life better for the concrete contractor*. We are an idea center striving to deliver thought provoking ideas based on “Concrete Advice for Business and Life” to stimulate you to reach new heights. As a user, you should remember to consider all information you receive, here at the Concrete Sherpa or elsewhere, not as a *cast in concrete* recommendation, but rather as an idea for you to consider and ponder.



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THE JOURNEY LEADING TO THE CONCRETE SHERPA PROJECT

The Concrete Sherpa Project (A [Sherpa](#) is a “guide”) was born at The Concrete Network in mid 2004. Here is how it happened:

The biggest surprise, or gift, since starting The Concrete Network in 1999 has been the concrete contractor friends from around the country we’ve made and witnessing the passion they have for what they do. These people include Dave Pettigrew, up in the San Francisco Bay Area, or the Verlennich brothers in Minnesota, or Bob Harris in Georgia, the list goes on and on. It’s quite inspiring.

We were once asked, “How are you so excited every day about concrete?” Well the answer is simple, it is impossible to not be excited about concrete when you have the job we do—interacting with hundreds of concrete contractors from every state in the country.

The thing we’ve learned about concrete contractors is that most are passionate *craftsmen*—they are often less passionate and experienced in the “office stuff”. Human nature channels us to do what we are most comfortable with; learning how to use a new saw-cutting tool is comfortable; learning and implementing a new estimating strategy, or job management tool, is not so comfortable.



Sherpa info

THE JOURNEY CONTINUES...

So Sherpa was born to provide FREE and easy to use information on topics many contractors are not too comfortable with.

- Concrete Sherpa is here to provide help to contractors who are often 'Lone Rangers' and don't have anyone to get solid business advice from.
- Concrete Sherpa is here to provide help for contractors who have to work too hard and too many hours in their business, and one day realize they need to work *on their business, not in their business*.
- Have fun with Concrete Sherpa and go faster towards reaching success than you might have on your own.
- To skeptics who think something free can't be valuable, or there must be a trick- visit Concrete Sherpa and decide for yourself.

We hope you make great use of the Concrete Sherpa and it helps you to become an awesome success for yourself, your family, your church, and your community.

VISIT THE CONCRETE SHERPA

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