Ulf Wolf, long-time writer for AWCI’s Construction Dimensions Magazine, conducts a Q&A below with Marek’s Director of Talent Development, Sabra Phillips, for an upcoming feature article on Leadership: Present and Future.

Be on the lookout for the November 2016 article to learn what Ulf discovers from other leaders across the wall and ceiling industry.

_UW: Leadership is a quality that can be hard to define, but one that we usually know when we see it._

_SP: So true!

_UW: How would you define Leadership?_

_SP: Ulf, I am not always known for brevity in my responses! When I review this question, a few things come to mind.

1.) When I look around Marek I think leadership is “heart” – caring deeply about people and our work, about making a difference for our team members and customers, and about doing the
right thing. It’s about living this out each day. Every person, regardless of role, has the opportunity to lead.

2.) Mike Holland and I had an interesting conversation about leadership a few months ago – about the paradox of leadership and how to be both everything and nothing at the same time. How can Marek leaders be everything our people and organization need to move forward and yet be nothing… that it is about the achievement of others and their empowerment to do great things (not about the leader).

3.) We work with a coach, Mattison Grey, who defines leadership as “creating enough curiosity so people will follow you just to see what happens.” We strive to be curious and elicit curiosity in others – we want to continuously learn, to coach and be coachable.

_UW: What qualities are you looking for in a good leader?

SP:

1.) People who are learners, who are curious. Those who treat others with dignity and respect and who give their all. People who have “heart,” who deeply care about our people and our work, about making a difference for each other and our customers, and doing the right thing.

This year at Marek we are focused on, “Giving Thanks, Making it True and Making it Happen.” Being grateful for each other and everything we have as an organization, ensuring we deliver on our company promises, and working together to achieve our goals.

2.) We can also look to what our fellow leaders tell us. During summer 2015, we conducted focus groups with all of our Field Leaders (Foremen, Superintendents) across the company. One of the areas we inquired about was leadership. There was widespread consensus that the best leaders are honest, fair, listen and are open to new ideas, follow through on commitments, instill confidence in others, set the example in terms of work ethic, and most importantly, respect others and earn their respect in return.

_UW: What leadership qualities does our construction industry require that other industries or businesses might not?

SP: In my experience, great leadership is much bigger than a specific industry. When you ask people from any industry to describe the best leader they have worked with or for, a similar profile emerges.

Bob Winder, Production Manager, San Antonio; Saied Alavi, Division Leader, Houston; and Mike Feather, Division Leader, Atlanta

_UW: What difference is there between a Leader and a Manager?

SP: A leader is more focused on engaging others around him or her to achieve a shared vision or goal, on listening, learning and helping create clarity, and often more focused on the future. In management mode, a person may be more focused on the here and now, on telling/directing, controlling and doing.

_UW: How do you teach, train, or develop leadership?
SP: We are actively working on this! We have an existing field leadership development program for new field leaders that includes on-the-job training and mentoring, peer groups, and interactive classroom workshops on leadership. We are currently developing the blueprint of a Marek leader and will be building learning programs around this, including project-based and experiential learning, for both new and existing leaders across the organization.

UW: What have you seen work (or not work) when it comes to recruiting or training future leaders for your company?

SP: Being able to articulate a clear vision for the future and include others in that vision is critical. Emerging leaders want to have a voice in the future as well as insight into how they can contribute and what is possible.

A few of our emerging leaders have told us they want us to set the bar high – so they can jump over it. Others express a desire for running room and the flexibility to achieve at an accelerated pace. Almost all want to know where the organization is going and what opportunities exist for them to rise and lead.

UW: How do you retain and develop employees with leadership qualities?

SP: Building on my response to the previous question - we are working on listening to and communicating more with our team about the future, about opportunities for growth and where they would like to go. This is not always easy. It takes something to have straightforward conversations and be willing to explore the unknown - from both parties.

This is a big responsibility involving vulnerability and trust. The responsibility to deliver on a bright future, the vulnerability to admit we do not have all the answers, and the trust in counting on each other to figure it out and work together to achieve it.

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