

The Defining Characteristic

Mark Breslin, CEO Breslin Strategies

Character is a quality most usually associated with people. As a professional negotiator, advocate and strategist for 25 years, it is now the first assessment I make of prospective allies or opponents. The funny thing is, that most people and organizations are under some form of illusion or delusion on how their character is defined or displayed. In many cases everyone sees who they really are but them. The starting place for both the individual and the organization is identifying your “defining characteristic”. What do I mean by this?

Take a look at the list below. It is a summary of the top 10 Most Admired Companies in the US based on an annual national business survey (3000+ top business leaders) by Fortune Magazine. See if you can accurately match the Top 10 company and it’s defining characteristic.

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|---------------------|---------------------------------|
| GE | Innovation |
| Starbucks | Management Excellence (2 firms) |
| Google | Long Term Strategic Vision |
| Fed-Ex | # 1 Ranked Place to Work |
| Berkshire Hathaway | A People Service Culture |
| Johnson and Johnson | Quality |
| Procter & Gamble | Remarkable Product Line |
| Apple | Unmatched Market Performance |
| Toyota | Low Cost, High Satisfaction |
| Procter and Gamble | Focus on Growth |
| Southwest Airlines | |

(answers & company ranking below)

The business lesson here is that every great organization has one defining characteristic. And everyone working for that organization knows what it is. This influences recruitment and hiring; management; product and services; marketing and promotion, company market share and ultimately profitability.

So the question becomes, what is the defining characteristic in your business and your personal contribution? What is the ONE distinctive, driving and identifiable element that makes your organizational identity one of leadership and excellence? Does everyone in your organization know it and share the same commitment? And how do you contribute to this from where you are in the organization?

For the construction industry, unfortunately, these questions are seldom asked. It is most always “profitability” as the answer; but profitability should be the result, not the identity. Why do certain companies consistently attract the best and most qualified workers, even if there is no wage differential? We all should be asking ourselves that question very hard. The answer is the defining characteristic.

Everyone in our business model of unionized construction needs to be on the same page on this. From contractor owners, superintendents and foremen, to business managers, training directors and agents. The most compelling reason for this, is that it directly relates to the performance of the craftspeople. They need a consistent defining characteristic of not only a company but an industry, to build pride and commitment. If it is not there, then it is just a paycheck. And no one wows anyone for just a paycheck.

As a leader and individual I aspire to define my characteristic as ***performance accountability***. Doing the right things for the right reasons without compromise or excuse. Now I will tell you that one does not always help you win popularity contests, but when applied to an organizational model it narrows the shotgun approach to the rifle shot of what needs to be done, by whom and when. And it influences who I hire, how they manage and are compensated and what happens at the end of every day, week, month and year. That one simple defining characteristic alone has more power than can be imagined.

So ask yourself what is your defining organizational characteristic? Elite performers? Competitive? People Caring Culture? Dog-Eat-Dog? Safety? Productivity? Teamwork? Only you can answer the question. I can tell you though, that people who are bored in their jobs or disconnected from a feeling of fulfillment usually cannot answer the question and it shows in their organizations. To become “Most Admired” requires more than taking credit for the obvious; it requires thoughtful discipline and focus. The rewards for this are higher levels of job satisfaction, greater production and commitment and a better bottom line.

(Ranking and Characteristics: 1. GE: Market Performance 2. Starbucks: A People Service Culture 3. Toyota: Quality 4. Berkshire Hathaway: Long Term Strategy 5. Southwest Airlines: Low Cost High Satisfaction 6. Fed-Ex: Management 7. Apple: Innovation 8. Google: Ranked # 1 Best Place to Work in the US 9. Johnson and Johnson: Management 10. Procter and Gamble: Product Line

Mark Breslin is a strategist and author specializing in labor-management challenges. He is the author of the *Survival of the Fittest* and *Organize or Die*. He addresses more than 50,000 labor and business leaders each year in North America. More on his work and profile is available at www.breslin.biz.