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Understanding Relationships

Saunders displays strong leadership to flourish in tough economic times

July 1, 2010

By *Kimberly MacArthur Graham*

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Nearly 40 years have passed since Dick Saunders started his own company to provide himself with a retirement fund and a "little bit of ownership."



Photo by Terry Shapiro

John Beeble, president & CEO, left, with Greg Schmidt, executive vice president, at the Adams County Government Center jobsite in Brighton.

He got more than he bargained for. Saunders Construction now has more than 350 people in skilled field positions, and it consistently has ranked among the top contractors in the Rocky Mountain region.

The firm also has been named Mountain States Construction's 2010 Colorado Contractor of the Year.

"Most satisfying to me is that throughout our history, the company has had a great reputation and accolades," says Saunders, who turns 70 in August and still shows up at the office. "Hardly a day goes by where I don't get a compliment on a great job or team players, and that brings more satisfaction to me than anything else."

John Beeble, company president and CEO, adds: "We define our success through the eyes of our customers. Projects take on a life of their own, based on what needs to happen for this to be successful for our customer. We run after that very hard. What people say about us when we're done is everything."

"Something else that's evolved is that, instead of focusing on our building – anyone can do that – what we try to be about is the experience. Competency doesn't make us different," Beeble says.

Legacy Relationships

From its headquarters in Centennial, Colo., Saunders Construction has earned a reputation for much more than competency. It has amassed an award-winning, wide-ranging portfolio covering office, retail, recreation, arts and entertainment, health care, technology and hospitality sectors.

The company's list of landmark projects includes the Arvada Center for the Performing Arts, Fiddler's Green Amphitheater, Broomfield Event Center, CU Center for Community and the University of Denver College of Law.

Strategic partnerships with "best-in-class" construction companies in other major markets have allowed Saunders

to extend its reach geographically.

Though the firm enjoys long-term relationships with high-profile clients—including HealthONE, Kaiser Permanente, Gates Corp., Whole Food Market Inc., Target Corp., Samsonite Corp., ProLogis and AT&T—it appreciates and nurtures all client relationships.

"We look for people that understand relationships," Beeble says. "We can teach people how to build buildings, but you can't teach them how to be relational."

Shawn Whinnen, vice president of operations, agrees that commitment to all clients, regardless of size, is important. "I think we're stereotyped as a large contractor only interested in doing large projects," Whinnen says. "We do many, many small projects, anything and everything, and they're extremely important to us."

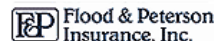
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Essence

Saunders says he feels strongly about values. "You have to be 100% honest and fair," he says. "I was half-smart, but I worked awfully hard. We always honored our word and paid our bills on time, even though, early on, we had to borrow money to do so."



Photo by Terry Shapiro

The 50-acre Adams County Government Center, which will open in October, will consolidate services for the county into a 330,000-sq-ft office building that includes a five-story tower and basement-level parking.

Whinnen says the value he identifies with most strongly is commitment. "We make a commitment and we honor it. Even if later, it doesn't make sense or isn't advantageous financially, we look at each other and we go ahead and follow through."

Beeble adds: "What makes us unique – and it's hard to talk about this without being clichéd, but it's really true – is our essence. We place Saunders the organization on a pedestal. We put that – our name, our brand – above all else. This drives our people to go the extra length. They do the impossible for our customers."

Greg Schmidt, executive vice president, says the firm has been deliberate about creating its own identity. "A lot of value is placed on the employer-employee relationship and creating opportunities for employees," he adds.

Schmidt is a good example of what he's talking about. He started with Saunders in 1994, working in preconstruction services and moving up through the ranks.

"I believe I've been blessed," Saunders says. "I'm a team player, which is important. Two heads are better than one, and three are better than two. I have in leadership great people who are doing a fantastic job in a difficult time."

Saunders Construction Recent Projects

Adams County Government Center

Brighton
\$84 million
Completion: Oct. 2010
Architect: Gensler

Casey Middle School

Boulder
\$26.2 million
Completion: May 2010
Architect: RB+B Architects Inc.

CSU Student Recreation Center Expansion

Fort Collins
\$27 million
Completion: Aug. 2010
Architect: Hastings+Chivetta

Clyfford Still Museum

Denver Completion: Aug. 2011
Articheck: Allied Works Architecture

UCD Health and Wellness Center

Aurora, Anschutz Medical Center
Completion: Feb. 2012
Architect: H+L Architecture, in association with Cannon Design Group

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