



Ten ways to keep your business development team motivated and productive.

Lessons learned from a home renovation project.

By Anne Scarlett, Printed in RainToday

Recently, I had the “pleasure” of buying an 1887 home that needed more renovation than anticipated—significantly more. As we moved forward with the project, unwelcome surprises would unfold again and again. From the start, we were working with an extremely tight budget. So, when the extra repairs became unavoidable, we were put in a precarious financial position.

Because of this dramatic shift in scope, I adopted an unconventional role in terms of how I engaged with the general contractor and to what level I participated. As I took on this role, I realized that the wisdom I gained from this experience reflects business development professionals’ best practices in terms of agile, effective management.

Yes, that’s right. A business developer’s role does not solely focus on external sales. Depending upon the firm’s organizational structure, a business developer is also likely charged with a range of management activities, such as advising on the assembly of a killer proposal, crafting a compelling team pitch, orchestrating a public relations campaign, or even participating in staff development. That means the AEC professional must consider a serious part of their role to include the management of diverse roles: firm principals, marketing coordinators, technical sub-consultants, external advisors, and more. At times, these management scenarios are intense, stressful, and may include tight schedules or budgets—not unlike my home renovation experience.

BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT BEST PRACTICES

- **Increase their desire to do good work for you.** If they truly like you, they will step up and work harder, even under stressful conditions. Guaranteed. You must act fast to pull out any and all charms, personal and professional. Make it a point to figure out each individual’s “happy buttons.” One person may hope that you’ll ask how they are doing on their studies for the LEED exam. Another may want you to take notice of an exceptional graphic that they produced for your presentation using BIM. Still another may respond best to a literal pat on the back. Figure out the happy button for each person, and push them often to get things done.
- **Kill them with kindness, even when you have something constructive to share.** Show your enthusiasm and appreciation for progress made. If you need to point out the negative (and you will), then make certain you can also point out something positive, even if it’s small. Example: “Jack, it’s clear you’ve given a lot of thought to this client and how we might best approach the Highland Park Community Center project. That’s essential; thank you. What we need from you now is to sort out your considerations and give us the top three priorities upon which to base our sales strategy.”
- **Respect their craft.** While you may not believe they are doing something the “right” way based upon your intuition and observations, you have to acknowledge that these are their areas of expertise. A colleague at a large engineering firm recently started a social media campaign. He hired an outside firm of experts, but then he got too deeply engrossed and gave direction that was counterproductive. In other words, he didn’t remain hands-off so that they could do their magic. He didn’t give them the respect they deserved.
- **Pick your battles.** We know everything is relative. And by all means, when the stakes are high, we all should strive for perfection. But in certain high-stress, rapid-speed situations, it doesn’t pay to gripe about things that are a lower priority. I recall a time when I was adamant about changing the way we presented information to a prospect. I wanted

to reorganize specific content into topic-centric buckets. My staff pushed back with the argument that it would take too much time relative to resulting value. I learned that nitpicking can diminish morale or even create unwanted distractions. Remember, you want to keep the team super-focused and positive.

- **Do not engage in negative conversations about others.** At some point, you may hear one of your team members speak negatively about another's work or approach, perhaps after an internal meeting or during happy hour. Just listen. Do not engage or fuel the fire (even if you agree with them). Take the high road, and keep your thoughts to yourself. Or speak directly to that particular team member about your concerns.
- **Over-communicate.** Might you feel like a broken record if you repeat yourself? Sure. Might you feel like you should only have to ask once? Absolutely. But when things are moving at top speed and on a tight budget, you must stay on top of every detail. Communicate on multiple layers to make sure you hit everyone—in meetings, by phone, by email, by office intranet. Even then, a few things may inevitably fall through the cracks.
- **Keep your cool.** If you feel frustration bubbling to the top, do whatever it takes to stay calm. I know a firm principal who takes walks to settle down. He leaves the office and walks around the block until he is relaxed enough to return. Revert to a professional demeanor (if you had been operating in "buddy" mode) to make it clear that something needs to get resolved with maturity and speed.
- **Meet in person often.** In the most stressful of projects, in-person interaction goes a long way to alleviate misunderstandings. If possible, make your schedule flexible enough to be available at a moment's notice to talk in person, maintain the human connection, and make on-the-spot decisions. For those with multi-office locations, I know this is tricky. You may want to try Skype to see if it can get the same result as in-person communication.
- **Offer up carrots, and then deliver.** Simply liking you or having a pride-of-workmanship may not be enough, especially in high-stress situations. Think of any rewards that you can offer. In the case of our house project, I'm able to offer the reward of recommending my GC and his team to over a thousand local contacts within my online network. I've also submitted a stellar review on Angie's list. Figure out what your team members find the most rewarding (remember point #1, everyone is different) and offer those incentives.
- **Roll up your sleeves and participate.** While it can be frustrating and may not seem like the best use of your time, you may very well need to roll up your own sleeves and help. Is it your "job" to do so? Maybe not. But you must show that you're all in it together. Perhaps you will be concerned that if you help out once—staying late to bind a proposal, lending a hand to ghost write a presentation at the last minute, offering extra guidance to your external public relations firm—that your efforts will somehow set a precedent that your team can slack or request your hands-on assistance every time. I don't think so. Rather, it will demonstrate that you all have a common goal and that you truly care about reaching a successful outcome.

As effective business development professionals, you are exceptional communicators, strategic thinkers, and relationship builders. But are your management skills up to snuff? Give these bits of wisdom some thought and ask yourself if you need to make a few renovations.