

Meeting the Challenge of Training and Retaining Skilled Employees

William R. Rice Has Built the Success of Commercial Plastering on How He Treats His Employees

By Thomas G. Dolan

“The key to any business success is retaining the right people from the field to the office,” says William R. Rice, president, Commercial Plastering, Inc., Bradenton, Fla.

This certainly has been the key to Rice’s success. It’s no secret that a major concern facing the industry is the finding, training and retaining skilled employees. Rice, who

has about 100 employees, and has annual revenues of about \$8 million, has a special challenge, for he does very little of commodity drywall but instead focuses on the more difficult crafts of plastering, lathing, stucco and exterior framing and sheathing.

Rice’s feelings about employees did not

Bill Rice started his business, Commercial Plastering, in 1976.



come from some abstract philosophy or reading a book about management. He learned everything he knows about running a company from, as he says, “the school of hard knocks.” This school began, for him, at an early age. When he was 15, he apprenticed to his brother-in-law, and began working as a plasterer and latherer in the Tampa area. At age 23, after seven years of hard work, he still hadn’t progressed very far in the world. He was married, with two children, and, when the economy went sour, he found himself without a job.

“Since I could find no one to work for, I had to find my own things to do,” Rice recalls. “I would do a little job here and

there for other plasterers, and then I started doing my own little jobs. It was hard; many people thought I was too young.”

Rice began Commercial Plastering in 1976. “We grew little by little, and became more and more stable. First we grew to five employees, then 10, then 15. Whenever I got a good man, I wanted to keep him. I was just 23, so when I started hiring, I might be getting someone who was 18. But I knew what he wanted. It was what I had wanted, and had never been able to get a feeling of my own stability and security. I wanted to convey of feeling of family, of belonging, that this company would be there for them, and it was their company too.”

Looking back, Rice says he wishes he knew about AWCI when he was younger. He recalls one early lesson when he did a take-off on prints and gave a price, only to realize there was a courtyard involved that he had not seen.

“I honored my commitment and learned real quickly that you can’t afford to make many mistakes like that. So I was looking for knowledge and asked some of the code people. They steered me to AWCI. So I joined and served on various committees for a long time. I felt very fortunate in being able to meet a lot of the most knowledgeable people in the industry. You ask questions and you will be lead in the right direction. There’s a wealth of knowledge to be found in

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AWCI, and you can get involved in the organization as little or as much as you want, and grow at your own pace.”

Rice did not originally have any ambition to own his own company, especial-

ly at the age of 23. “I would have stayed where I was if people had made me feel secure. I think I’ve always been aware of that, and how important that is for someone I wanted to work for me. I used to watch how bosses acted. One

would pull up in his car, not talk to anybody, just look around and leave. I think that owners and managers often don't really take the time to become involved with the people they work with. The industry is known as being rough and tough. And that's fine. But you can't just boss people around, tell them what to

do and not do, and expect them to get better."

Banking on Incentives

Not surprisingly, Rice treats his employees well, pays them well, has a 401(k) profit sharing plan, and is generous with

bonuses for work well done. He works to maintain a personal touch. "I don't undermine the superintendents, but if someone wants to come into my office and tell me how he feels, I encourage that. If he can't feel he can tell me the truth, I'll never know it. I won't go over a superintendent's head. But if there is a real problem, I'll sit down with the superintendent and the employee and we'll work it out."

Rice adds, "We try to do things with the men, such as go on fishing trips. I sponsor bass tournaments and baseball teams the guys play in. We have company picnics and Christmas parties that the whole family can come to, to try to give a family atmosphere." People who come to work for Rice tend to stay there, and he has very little turnover. "People who are here 10 years are presented with a ring," he says. "They consider it an honor, and feel proud to be a part of this company and proud of what they do. That's what you need to instill in your employees if you want them to do quality work."

But all of this motivation is not simply an end in itself. It has a direct impact on profitability. "The unfortunate thing about business is that you always have to make money. Banks, bonding companies, accountants—everybody is always looking at the bottom line. It's always an important factor, and a never-ending battle."

But here's where having skilled employees who really care about their work comes into play. For, as Rice says, "what will always drag you down and can kill you in the end, is that if you have to do a lot of punch out work, touching up and fixing up what was busted, done wrong or left unfinished. You have to

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wrong with honest labor, and some people are content to stay at that level,” Rice says. “But we try to analyze the strong points an employee has and help him grow. If he shows an interest in blueprints, train in that and let him grow. Some managers get a guy who is really

good at one thing and keep him there. We try to help them grow so they become more of an asset to the company, and so they feel like an asset.”

For this reason Rice promotes only from within. “All our positions, from vice

check all of the time and be your own worst critic. That’s what your customers will remember you for, not what you did right, but whatever you did wrong, even the little things. That’s why it pays to have employees who care as much about the finished product as you do.”

Constant Rhythm

Another important thing Rice does, both to make for a stable company, and to provide ongoing work for his employees, is to schedule jobs so there is always a predictable amount of work, neither too much or too little. “If we plan forward for a few months, and we see a gap, we market hard to fill that gap,” Rice says. “On the other hand, we don’t take what we can’t handle. I think some guys strive for a big volume, but then get too busy and have a hard time with quality control. A constant rhythm is what we go for.”

A big factor in keeping good employees is providing them with an upward career path in the company, “There’s nothing

president to estimators to general superintendent, are filled by people who came from the field as latherers or plasterers,” Rice says. He is also bringing in the second generation. His son, Jason, who

worked during summers in high school and college, started with the company full-time after college.

A major challenge for the industry, Rice

says, is attracting talented younger people. “When I grew up there were a lot of great people in the industry,” Rice says. “And that was a time when everybody was brought up to the same level, and you either went into industry, or the government or college. But over the past 20 years, every mother wanted her son to go to college rather than learn a trade, and that’s why there is a problem. Only so many people can go into the computer field. We have to find a way to show talented young people that there’s a good future in construction.”

But an even bigger challenge than attracting college graduates to the business side, Rice says, “is training mechanics. We have to join together and figure

out a way to train people. There is not a strong union in Florida but if there was, I would join—and I'm a nonunion contractor. The main benefit of unions is a unified way of training people."

It's very hard to train plasterers, Rice continues: "I'm not taking anything away from drywall mechanics. They are very skilled, and some framers are tremendous. But plastering is a finer art, and takes more training." For this reason Rice does a lot of training himself in terms of things like creating molds and rubber and latex bowls, as well as taking employees to events like the Restoration Convention in Washington, D.C., where they can learn more and sign up for various classes.

Stuck on Stucco?

Does Rice have much competition for his highly specialized work? "There is competition everywhere, especially in Florida; there is so much stucco plastering here, and stucco is our main product. But we do everything from custom homes to schools to large condominiums. We have the training, experience and equipment, so we can do the larger condominiums that others can't. We can take a block concrete building, often one not in good shape, and make it look really good. And then we get called to do the specialty work, the plastering to make the cherubs, cornices and molds you don't see every day. Our niche is the combination of being able to do both the large stucco jobs and the more specialty-oriented ones.

Recent jobs include a \$2 million stucco job on a new hotel, a \$1 million renovation of a circus museum and a renovation of a customs house with 1-inch

gypsum plaster. "We've done enough major jobs that we're a very recognized company. If we know a job is coming, we'll always get the chance to bid, so we don't have to really go out and market ourselves," Rice says.

Although Rice recognizes that drywall

has largely taken over the interior market, he says, "I think there will always be a call for plastering, in really nice homes, theater renovations and many other venues. Plastering creates a certain effect you can't get elsewhere." 