

STEVENS  
CONSTRUCTION  
INSTITUTE, INC.

MANAGEMENT ADVISORS TO CONSTRUCTION CONTRACTORS

## ADVICE TO YOUNG CONSTRUCTION PROFESSIONALS

BY MATT STEVENS

We have been asked on several occasions for career advice from young construction professionals. Here is the start of the conversation that others should continue. We have collected and listed 15 hard won lessons and observations for young construction professionals to consider. We are certain there are many more if you ask any executive in a construction firm. Again, here is a starting point.

1. **Be quiet for the first month of your job.** One of my mentors told me many things when I was ready to graduate, such as “listen more than you speak especially in the first month of the job” What he meant was, you won’t know anything for a while. Certainly, the politics and the company culture were alive before you got there. You need to observe and not comment until you know. Hearing things from “the new guy” may result in resentment and damage your ability to work well with others.

I have seen over enthusiasm hurt young graduates in their professional development. Much of this emanates from professional respect others may not have for you. You have to earn it first.

2. **Do the basics well.** Be on time, take notes, follow up, etc. When you are new, you are a rookie. We all are rookies when do something for the first time, at any age. However, doing the basics can only show that you are focused and that you can be trusted with more challenging tasks in the future.
3. **Be curious and capture knowledge.** Your career is a long upstream swim in a winding river. You can’t see the end, but you can see the next turn in the stream. Nobody has a perfect journey. It takes a consistently intense effort to accomplish something substantial.
4. **Be cost-conscious.** This is a cost-side business, so this focus is important. People who own construction firms usually have had some difficult financial times before things got better. You are spending their money. Show respect for that and be good about stewardship. By the way, being frugal is not “cheap.”
5. **Be supportive of your boss.** Everyone has faults and anybody can be negative about any person. However, it is the person of good character who is positive or silent, never negative about their boss. Other people you may work for will see this good attitude and won’t forget it. Their future plans may include you.
6. **Think and write before speaking.** Clarify your thoughts. Know what you need to say and what others may say in response. Construction people challenge. Thinking aloud or “on your feet” is not a good habit.

7. **Ask for help only after making a valiant effort(s) to solve an issue.** No one will disrespect you for trying very hard first and then seeking assistance. However, don't be afraid to ask questions or ask for help if you're in too deep.
8. **Take slights with grace.** As the new person, you will be low in the informal pecking order and you may experience a hazing ritual that comes with being young or new in our hard business. People may have a little fun at your expense. It is just part of the slightly abnormal humor we all share in construction. Older supervisors tend to do it to all young people. It is normal. Take with grace.
9. **Be modest.** Someone is always better than you are. Also, there are processes that are not as elegant as yours might be, but they work. Be respectful of anything that works. As a side note, giving someone a deserved compliment doesn't take away anything from your professional standing.
10. **Salt it away.** Save money from every paycheck. Even if it's only a small amount, when you get to be a senior professional, you will be surprised about the amount you have accumulated. Remember, the rule of 72 rewards those who invest early and often.
11. **Don't worry about being seen as successful.** Visible success is a myth. In construction, success is defined differently. From laborer to journeymen to operator to project manager and executive vice president, success is the same: you earn the respect of the intelligent people. They know how hard and unfair our business is. Doing the things that have solid reasons behind them shows thoughtfulness. Persistently pursuing a solution shows character. These are non-visible but, respected things.
12. **Don't display your "certified smart" symbols.** Take off your class ring. Take down your college diploma. Your education should be evident to others in your actions. What you know is more important than some paper that says you learned it. Since three quarters of Americans don't have at least a bachelor's degree, you may be perceived as having contempt for others without formal education.
13. **Seek perfect information.** You may not have the developed skills or experience that older professionals may have however, asking questions, researching and knowing more about any issue or project will place you in a "go-to" position. You will be sought because you know what the facts are. The construction industry has dozens of moving parts and a great amount of uncertainty. Regardless of your age, knowing more than most will give you greater value than those who guess or don't know what the facts are.
14. **It is not about working smarter or harder.** I have talked to many, many of "20 something" construction professionals. They are very smart and they feel they work very hard. Fair enough, but don't compare work ethic notes with a poverty born project manager or an immigrant field supervisor, you will be embarrassed. To my point, you must work steadier. Look no further than the jobsite. The very best journeymen and operators work steady. Our business is so complex; you have to be steady in your effort. It allows you to

catch the details and keeps you from rushing which produces oversights and mistakes. Again, observe the best craftspeople and operators for proof.

15. **Your body of work matters.** After a couple of decades, your body of work will be well established. If it is one that is solid, your career options will be many. If it is weak or inconsistent, your options will be fewer. A body of work operates on a very simple principle: your efforts, conscientiousness, skills, and other like characteristics will “come out in the wash”. You cannot fake a great professional body of work. This business will test you and find out who you really are. It will make you humble or make you quit. So, build your skills and habits carefully and fully. Don’t take shortcuts and the lazy way out. People in this industry know all the excuses and they can recognize a fraud when they see one. The kind of professional you are, will deliver few or many options when you get to be my age.

**Matt Stevens** is a management advisor who works only with construction contractors. He has been doing so since 1994. He is a Senior Lecturer in Construction at the University of Melbourne, Australia. He has more than 35 years of experience in the construction industry. His books are published by **McGraw Hill** - *Managing a Construction Firm on Just 24 Hours a Day* (416 pages) and *The Construction MBA* (512 pages). His firm, Stevens Construction Institute, Inc. is located in the United States at [www.stevensci.com](http://www.stevensci.com). Reach Matt at [mstevens@stevensci.com](mailto:mstevens@stevensci.com).