

## **Scott DeLano of Certified Construction Services: “Hire the Right People”**

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*As part of my series about the “How To Take Your Company From Good To Great”, I had the pleasure of interviewing Scott DeLano.*

*Scott DeLano, Principal, brings 25 years of field and project management experience building educational institutions, hospitality, multifamily projects, medical/facilities, restaurant/service industry projects, and historic restoration work in Michigan and throughout the mid-South. He’s known for his commitment to building and maintaining relationships with clients, designers, subcontractors and project partners. He has a reputation for finding valuable solutions to keep projects on budget, on schedule and delivering on commitments.*

**Thank you so much for joining us in this interview series! Before we dive in, our readers would love to “get to know you” a bit better. Can you tell us a bit about your ‘backstory’ and how you got started?**

**A** contractor might seem like an unlikely path for someone who studied and taught history, so my backstory is a bit different than you expect.

After high school, I spent five years in the United States Army, which brought me to Fort Campbell, KY, from 1992–1995, serving in the 101st Airborne Division. During that time, I attended college classes on post and eventually remained in Clarksville, Tennessee, and graduated from Austin Peay State University with a degree in History. I returned to my home in Detroit, Michigan, and attended graduate school at Wayne State University, studying and teaching history. In 1999, my oldest son was born. The money I was earning as a Graduate Teaching Assistant and this newly found responsibility as a father pushed me into another career path — construction. I worked with a general contractor as a union laborer and quickly moved up to be a field superintendent. After nine years with that company, we relocated back to Clarksville in 2008 to raise our children. I was offered a project manager position with a mid-sized Nashville-based general contractor. This position afforded me the opportunity to learn estimating, project management and the business side of a construction company. Coupled with my field experience and hard work, I was promoted to Vice President of Operations and learned how to manage personnel and processes. In 2015, I was offered a position to start a Nashville office for a Chattanooga-based general contractor, and I decided to make the leap. Building a successful book of work in a short time, I hired staff to help me manage and deliver on our commitments. Unfortunately, it lasted only two years due to circumstances outside of my control.

But frustrating setbacks can lead to wonderful success. This proved to be true when I co-founded Certified Construction Services, where I'm proud to have worked on some of the most exciting developments in Nashville. Our work has been recognized in several leading industry publications, but more importantly, our projects have enriched local Nashville communities. Our multifamily projects are incredibly popular — including the recently completed Illume in Nashville, which reached 100% occupancy less than a year after opening. Both the Alina Condos and Linden Row Townhomes in Hillsboro Village are complete and nearing full occupancy. Additionally, our retail and commercial developments have welcomed small businesses that have made Nashville an even more dynamic city.

**Can you tell us a story about the hard times that you faced when you first started your journey? Did you ever consider giving up? Where did you get the drive to continue even though things were so hard?**

When I was offered my first position as a field superintendent it was a scary moment. Imagine being in your mid-twenties with limited construction experience and being asked to manage a multimillion-dollar commercial construction project! That's when the owner of the company pulled me aside, told me he knew I had the confidence and ability to manage the project and taught me one of the most formative lessons of my early career.

He told me to pay close attention to the subcontractors and listen to any advice and assistance that they would offer to me. I found out early that every question is worth asking and that if you take the time to ask questions (and more importantly listen) that people will take the time to teach you and mentor you. These early lessons were so important to my growth as an adult and as a contractor.

**What do you think makes your company stand out? Can you share a story?**

I believe that our differentiator is our people and our constant strive to create and strengthen relationships. We constantly talk about fostering relationships with all our project partners. We treat our subcontractors and suppliers with the same respect and gratitude that we do as our project owners and architects. I emphasize every day to our project teams that we are only as successful as our subcontractors and suppliers, and that our priority is to treat them with respect every day.

As an owner of a construction company, there is nothing better than having a subcontractor, architect or owner go out of their way to compliment the hard work and dedication of our teams. Numerous times in the last four years, people have called or contacted me to just simply tell me how appreciative they are of our efforts on a project. Recently, one of our key suppliers, who has been dealing with multiple general contractors in the region, bragged to me about how he really enjoys coming to our office because we have a vibe that is just special. He said that we truly enjoy what we are doing and that we make customers feel so comfortable. It was a great compliment from someone who deals with all kinds of personalities and situations in our industry.

**Which tips would you recommend to your colleagues in your industry to help them to thrive and not “burn out”?**

It helps to realize that, like all the other team members, your perspective is valuable. When I would complain to my old boss about issues I was having on a project, he would always say, “if it weren’t for those issues, then there would be no need for project managers, and you would be out of a job.”

That advice empowered me, making me feel like my unique skill set brought a critical perspective to the team. In time, I was able to take those issues and make them “opportunities,” developing different strategies to build solutions. Some managers tend to get frustrated and approach issues in an unproductive manner or just ignore them completely. Both of these methods are almost guaranteed to produce poor results.

**None of us are able to achieve success without some help along the way. Is there a particular person who you are grateful towards who helped get you to where you are? Can you share a story?**

I wouldn’t be where I am today without two people. The first was the aforementioned owner of the first construction company I worked for. I remember him telling me that “I know you want to teach history for a living, but I see something in you that tells me that if you want to take this opportunity I am providing to you, then you will succeed.” He remained a key mentor in my life for many years, and I try to emulate his leadership style with my employees and project partners.

The second person that impacted my early career was the mason foreman on my first project. He could be intimidating. I was inexperienced. Instead of taking advantage of that, he took me under his wing and taught me how to read blueprints, understand construction sequencing, and provided me with the first in-depth training that I ever had in the industry. He listened to my endless questions, and made sure that I left the conversation with a better understanding of what we were talking about. The lessons I learned on that first project I have never forgotten., And beyond all of the industry knowledge he passed on, he inspired me to pay it forward and invest my time in folks who are new to the field.

**Ok thank you for all that. Now let's shift to the main focus of this interview. The title of this series is "How to take your company from good to great". Let's start with defining our terms. How would you define a "good" company, what does that look like? How would you define a "great" company, what does that look like?**

There are many good companies out there that are profitable and create jobs and opportunities for others. I have been part of such companies. On the other hand, there are great companies out there that focus on more than profits and on getting that next contract. Those companies elevate the project and project team to top priority. They are mindful of how they treat people during the construction process, they focus on full delivery on commitments, and they ensure that everyone benefits from the successes. I want every employee to work hard but to enjoy their job. I want every subcontractor and supplier to perform on our projects but to feel like they are respected and appreciated for their efforts. I want every architect that we work with to have a lasting impression that we are dedicated to being a true partner with them through the project and beyond. I want every owner to enjoy working with our teams and feel like we really care about their project, their budget and their success. I believe that the great companies have that extra something that really makes people want to work with them — and this is something that I strive for us to achieve every day.

**Based on your experience and success, what are the five most important things one should know in order to lead a company from Good to Great? Please share a story or an example for each.**



**Based on your experience and success, what are the five most important things one should know in order to lead a company from Good to Great? Please share a story or an example for each.**

The first is to Lead by Example. This is something that I have always made a priority in my life and I carry it with me even today. There is nothing that I would ask an employee or project partner to do that I would not do myself. Leading from the rear or leading from afar is not an effective way of motivating people and it can severely damage morale. When people see you as an active leader who will dig in and help out — especially when things get sideways — then you gain their trust and earn their respect. I learned this very early in my construction career, when I saw the owner of the company show up on Saturdays to help the project team move materials and clean up areas that were behind schedule or needed an extra push to get them completed. He worked as hard as anyone out there and his presence made everyone work just that much harder. His presence was uplifting and watching him work gave everyone an appreciation of that he led by example and was not afraid to get his hands dirty to get the job done.

The second is Listen to Others. Too many leaders talk to hear themselves and do not listen to anyone else in the room. Great companies hire people for the talents they possess and for what they can bring to the table to create success. No business owner has all the answers, and taking the time to actually listen to your employees' ideas and suggestions can make a world of difference for the company and for the staff. One of the ways that we create intentional moments for listening to one another is during feedback sessions that our project teams hold both during and following the completion of projects. From our field crews to our project managers, we talk about what is going well and what needs to be improved. Instead of just issuing a directive from the top, we brainstorm about the way we are handling situations, the processes that we have in place that work (and at times don't) and how we can collectively create situations that make our project perform more consistently. I also personally take time to meet with project owners and architects to ask them about our project teams and performance on their projects. All of their feedback only makes us stronger and helps us grow as a company and individuals.

The third is to Hire the Right People. This seems obvious but it is actually very difficult. While many people hire on merit and success, I actually look for people who have that entrepreneurial spirit and demonstrate strong leadership qualities. The nuts and bolts of what we do as constructors can be taught to just about anyone, but I believe that people are born with the ability to lead and be self-motivated. People who possess these skills do not need to be tightly managed and can turn out to be the best representatives of your company even if they initially lack experience. Most self-motivated employees will seek out opportunities and look to expand their value to the company. They are the ones that can be a building block for a company and can be the mentors of the next generation.

The fourth is Do What You Do Best. As an organization it is critical that you stick to your business model and make it the basis of your decision making. As constructors in our current market, we have opportunities knocking at the door all the time. As a younger company, it is very easy to get caught up in expansion, growth and things that are outside of your comfort zone. When we started this company, we discussed what each of our goals were for the company and made sure that those goals were in unison for the partners as well as the company. To have differing goals and strategies would have set us up for failure. We know that we can continue being successful by leaning on our current markets, by putting an emphasis on maintaining our current client relationships and seeking new ones, by hiring the right people and by growing the company in a steady manner. We also have a unique position in the marketplace as a vertically integrated entity in that we develop properties, along with designing and constructing projects. This is something that none of our competitors possess and it provides more opportunity for us and on multiple levels. While we build and construct projects for other clients and architects, we also feed our own pipeline with our developments and design work. This allows us to be much more intentional, ensuring that we are hyper-focused on maintaining a backlog of work that fits our business model.

The fifth is Treat Others the Way You Expect to be Treated. This is at the core of our company and it permeates through our people every day. We treat our employees like family and we expect them to treat our project partners in the same manner. This is not a sign of weakness, but rather of humility and caring for others — which at times can be lost in business practices. The old adage is true — you get more with sugar than salt. I have witnessed it countless times in my career and I have worked next to people who try to manage with intimidation and control, which typically leads to a breakdown in morale. If you want the best people and best project partners, then treating them as equals and showing them appreciation for their efforts is critical. In the same manner, we also hold our project partners to the high standards that we hold ourselves. We expect people to perform and exceed project expectations and we hold them accountable, from the project owner to the subcontractor.

**Extensive research suggests that “purpose driven businesses” are more successful in many areas. Can you help articulate for our readers a few reasons why a business should consider becoming a purpose driven business, or consider having a social impact angle?**

If the sole purpose of your business is to generate profit and opportunity, then I think that it is time to step back and reconsider what you are doing. Obviously, profits fuel business and are a necessity to survive in any marketplace, but having a mission beyond profit margins should be a high priority for all businesses.

Many of our developments and construction projects are centered on bringing reasonably-priced residences, retail, development and growth opportunities to this area of Nashville, but more importantly we are partnering with local business leaders to ensure that they are also part of our work. For us to be part of changing the landscape of this area and provide opportunities for business owners, community members, students and staff is what drives our passion and success.

**What would you advise to a business leader who initially went through years of successive growth, but has now reached a standstill. From your experience do you have any general advice about how to boost growth and “restart their engines”?**

First, do a deep dive into figuring out what you do best as an organization and what factors drove your initial success. Second, discover what changed and how that affected your decline. Business is a moving entity and tends to morph and change with economic change and market developments. Identifying changes in business models, personnel changes or financial decisions would be key components to identifying what worked and what did not work.

**Generating new business, increasing your profits, or at least maintaining your financial stability can be challenging during good times, even more so during turbulent times. Can you share some of the strategies you use to keep forging ahead and not lose growth traction during a difficult economy?**

Like many of our competitors, we were hit with numerous hardships because of the pandemic. The approach that we took was to clearly communicate with all of our project clients on what was happening and how it was affecting construction budgets and schedules. Many of our projects were for sale condos and townhomes, and it was critical that we provided clear and consistent information to owners and sales teams regarding the cost and timing of getting these projects completed. This reliable flow of communication allowed all of us to properly react and decide how we wanted to handle each situation.

We also remained very consistent in our business model and approach during the economic difficulties. It is easy to panic and start looking outside of your comfort zone for projects and opportunities. Instead, we kept our focus on what we do best, and we put our energy and resources into making relationships stronger and getting the projects we already had lined up to start construction.

**In your experience, which aspect of running a company tends to be most underestimated? Can you explain or give an example?**

The responsibility that one feels to others to ensure that the business flourishes. This is something that I feel everyday and on many different levels. First, the responsibility to my business partners and employees to make sure that we are providing the best opportunities for them to succeed. To have multiple families and people financially tied to the company's success is a large burden and is something that heavily weighs on me during decision making. I take this responsibility very seriously. Having gone through a situation where I witnessed a failing business and saw the direct financial impacts that it can have on people — it resonates in my mind and impacts my decision making. I also feel a deep responsibility to our clients and project partners to make the right decisions and to keep the project commitments moving forward. They have entrusted us to perform and deliver on some very important projects in this community, and there is an immense amount of pride and pressure that comes with that responsibility.

**As you know, “conversion” means to convert a visit into a sale. In your experience what are the best strategies a business should use to increase conversion rates?**

First, be as genuine as you can when dealing with potential clients. Do not tell them what they want to hear, but rather be honest and forthright in your communication. The client is potentially entrusting and investing millions of dollars into your company, and should be treated in the same manner that you would want to be treated. I have entered meetings and delivered bad news to a potential client, but I would rather be honest and let them know the potential obstacles that may exist. Typically, those clients appreciate the honesty. Second, make sure that you are well-versed in the project details and costs when meeting with a client on a project. You want them to leave that meeting knowing that you have done your homework and that you know their project inside and out. Finally, show passion and excitement about their project. No matter the budget size, that project is a top priority for that client, and you need to let them know that you are as excited about the opportunity as they are. Too many times we go into those meetings with an administrative agenda and do not show the passion that we should to the client and the project.

**Of course, the main way to increase conversion rates is to create a trusted and beloved brand. Can you share a few ways that a business can earn a reputation as a trusted and beloved brand?**



First, by doing what they say they are going to do. It is a simple business rule, but delivering on commitments is so key to building relationships with clients and vendors, and elevating your brand in the industry. Second, always pay subcontractors and vendors on time. This is something that can differentiate a contractor from its competitors in a quick manner. Third, sure that your projects stand out from the rest. As we have the ability to design and build many of our projects, we have the controls in place to ensure that we are designing and building projects that set ourselves apart from other projects. This differentiates us from our competitors and allows us to build our own brand. Finally, we ensure our projects are safe, clean and well branded with our company information and logos. We use project sites as marketing banners to promote our name and brand as our projects are being constructed.

**Great customer service and great customer experience are essential to build a beloved brand and essential to be successful in general. In your experience what are a few of the most important things a business leader should know in order to create a Wow! Customer Experience?**

- 1) Under promise and over deliver to you client
- 2) Always fulfill commitments — no matter what
- 3) Communicate...Communicate...Communicate to the client. I strive to make sure that the client knows just as much about the project as our project teams. No surprises.

4) Show passion for the project and the customer

5) Get to know the client, their mission and their wants and needs — every client is different and you have to adapt and change your approach with each one

6) Be honest and forthright with them ALL OF THE TIME

**What are your thoughts about how a company should be engaged on Social Media? For example, the advisory firm EisnerAmper conducted 6 yearly surveys of United States corporate boards, and directors reported that one of their most pressing concerns was reputational risk as a result of social media. Do you share this concern? We'd love to hear your thoughts about this.**

There's no doubt social media is important in the 21st century. But I still believe completing excellent projects and maintaining strong relationships in “the real world” is the best way to build a brand.

**What are the most common mistakes you have seen CEOs & founders make when they start a business? What can be done to avoid those errors?**

1) Poor and inconsistent leadership from the top.

2) Not identifying what you do best and sticking to it.

3) Hiring the wrong people and putting them in the wrong positions.

4) Scattered approach to business development instead of a laser focused approach.

5) Not communicating with personnel and employees. You want them to know what is going on and getting their buy-in to the company and direction is critical to success.

**Where can readers find out more about your company?**

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**This was very inspiring. Thank you so much for the time you spent with this!**

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