

Breslin Column

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A Bare Knuckled Choice

When I was in high school I was not the first kid most parents wanted to see their kid hang out with. Thus it was no surprise that after a major championship basketball game with an arch-rival school, one of their reputed tough kids, was giving me the “stink eye” out in the parking lot. I knew a fight was coming and frankly didn’t give myself much of a chance based on his reputation.

Just about that time, a pick-up truck rolled by and beer bottles were tossed at us from the guys in the bed. The bottles smashed right in front of us and showered our legs with glass. I looked at him and the first words he ever said to me were, “lets’ go”. And into battle we went together. This was the start of both an epic brawl and a lasting personal friendship that has now spanned thirty years of our lives.

It is funny how adversaries can immediately put aside their differences when faced with a threat from a third party. When under pressure, you decide fast who is on or off your team. When under attack, how clearly what bonds us is much more compelling than what divides us. But without outside pressure, and when left to our own devices, the petty nature of man or our competitive ego needs can sometimes cause a great degree of “stink eye” when none is called for. Is this not the state of our union construction industry today?

Be it labor vs. management. Or union vs. union. Or local vs. local. Leader vs. leader. Or association vs. association. Contractor vs. contractor. Or any combination. The competitive and fragmented nature of the union construction industry often tends to paint our potential partners as adversaries. And eventually, like the Hatfield’s and McCoy’s there exists a belief system of non-cooperation that we cannot overcome despite every reason to do so.

The threatening third party arrived in our industry decades ago, in the form of strong open shop competition. And despite their arrival and subsequent market domination of “our high school parking lot” some still persist in traditional old school non-cooperation with each other. Now I don’t know about you, but if some guys are punching me in the back of the head, common sense tells me that I need to strategically partner with whoever shares my direct interests. It is not about me or the way I wish it was. It is a choice of politics versus pragmatism. It is a choice of reality vs. rhetoric. It is a choice between joint risk taking vs. denial and market decline.

Now it must be said that harmony for its own sake is a waste of time. There has to be a uniting objective. And blaming the other guy when you won’t do what is necessary is no

strategy either. Unity is based on ‘doing’ not talking. I don’t want to find myself in a serious fight and find out that my partner is a wimp. Unable to carry his load; overcautious and unable to take risk; unwilling to wade in when it gets tough; incapable of changing methods, strategies or tools for immediate and necessary results. I want to know that he trusts me and I trust him so we are not wasting time and energy suspiciously looking over our shoulder at one another. I am thinking about what he needs and trying to get it for him and he is doing the same thing for me. Unity in business or personal relationships cannot be achieved with promises or “waiting for the other guy” to make the first moves. Trust is built on action, and every person in our industry; from major contractors, union leaders, trainers, agents, association leaders, down to the very last apprentice in the field, are now required to take both personal initiative and action. All in service of unity in the face of competition and our own market survival.

The ‘beer bottle’ of our market challenge broke at our feet years ago. The Us vs. Them changed. And yet today we often are still standing here focused on our differences. It distracts us from what needs to be done but that is not going to get us anywhere. There is only one choice. There is only one alternative. We need to go out into that market and try to kick some ass **together. We need to watch out for each other and build a business bond of truth and trust.** Lets see if that can create a lasting opportunity, a meaningful friendship or an unbreakable bond. With that accomplished, the market will surely follow.

Mark Breslin is a strategist and author specializing in labor-management challenges. He is the author of Survival of the Fittest, Organize or Die and coming in 2008 Alpha Dog. He addresses more than 50,000 labor and business leaders each year in North America. More on his work and profile is available at www.breslin.biz.