



Where leaders find advice

Outside peer groups, inside senior team members, friends and family, and staff are all fair game.

*By Liisa Sullivan
Correspondent*

Leaders are used to blazing the path for others, but who do they turn to when they are in need of counsel? For many, it depends on the situation, and mixing it up seems to be the key.

Turning to outside leadership groups. Peter Moore, president, **Chen Moore and Associates** (Fort Lauderdale, FL), a 43-person civil engineering, environmental engineering, planning, landscape architecture, GIS and construction observation service firm, says that he became a partner at the firm at the age of 27, and then president at 32. He admits that, often, he has had a difficult time finding a suitable peer group where he can obtain candid advice.

“I’ve found out the hard way that seeking counsel with family or longtime friends is far too often slanted toward a favorable opinion in my own favor when I needed objective counsel,” he says. “However, I’ve been fortunate enough to have been involved with several community (county and state) leadership organizations. Involvement with these organizations has given me the ability to make ‘adult friends’ who are both close to me personally, but also have the ability to be objective in their opinions about myself and my decisions.”

Currently, Chen serves on the board of Leadership Broward and has also been through the Florida Engineering Leadership Institute (a program through FICE/ACEC Florida) and, most recently, Leadership Florida.

Surround yourself. Robert Coons, director of finance, **Randall Paulson Architects** (Roswell, GA), a 25-person firm, knows that not any one person knows it all.

“Those leaders who have any real substance to their character will realize this, and seek counsel to make appropriate, business-related decisions when the time arises,” he says. “And, seeking counsel should not be thought of as the easy way out of a situation, but as a means of solidifying your course of action (i.e., what will happen if I do this, or what will happen if I do that?).”

Coons says that you should surround yourself with people who are smarter or more knowledgeable than you. Here are some things he does:

- Hire an outside business consultant on retainer who has expertise in providing counsel to firms your size. This is a great person to bounce ideas off of.
- Join a like-minded peer group where the members share ideas and offer suggestions in a confidential manner.

- Put your CPA and attorney on speed dial for tax or labor-related issues that may arise in the normal course of business. A 15-minute phone call may cost you \$150, but that is pennies considering the fact that one wrong move in either of these areas can cost you “big time.”

So, half the battle, Coons says, is knowing when to seek counsel.

“Don’t be afraid to do so, it’s all downhill from there,” he says.

If the shoe fits... At **QUAD KNOPF, INC.** (Visalia, CA), a 106-person multidiscipline engineering and architecture firm, Michael Knopf, CEO, says that who he seeks counsel from depends on the situation.

“I have several senior colleagues in other local firms who I know well through the ACEC Sequoia Chapter,” he says. “I consult with them often. They are helpful for a number of situations. I also have maintained a great working relationship with our former outside Board Chairman, Joel Bennett, a former industry executive with a broad range of international experience. Of course, I depend daily on various members of my senior management team.”

Janel Freeman, CFO, Quad Knopf, says that she typically seeks counsel from Knopf, but will also turn to the senior management team as needed.

“Michael is usually my go-to person,” she says.

Keith Marcott, executive vice president, **Trihydro Corporation** (Laramie, WY), a 390-person engineering and environmental consulting firm, agrees with Knopf that it depends on the situation. He says he is most likely to bounce ideas off other members of the leadership team.

“There is a small group of folks in that circle that represent a diverse group of backgrounds and points of view, so I sometimes find it helpful to pulse more than one person to get different viewpoints,” he says. “In addition, I also have some good, trusted friends in other companies within the industry who are often a great source of insight.”

Shake it up. Mark Laska, president and CEO, **Great Ecology** (New York, NY), a 34-person integrated science and design firm, has several go-to resources. They include:

- **Wife.** She has watched the business grow from vision, to inception, to a thriving and functioning company for more than 15 years. “She knows me better than anyone,” he says.
- **Forum.** This is a business group of six other CEOs and company owners who meet monthly to discuss mutual business issues. It acts as an advisory board. “These are people who tend to share common problems and issues in other industries and I share a deep level of trust with them,” Laska says.
- **Friends.** There are three- to 4 friends in the industry at other companies who are deeply knowledgeable about business issues. “They are excellent external sounding boards,” he says.
- **Mentor.** Paul Zofnass, CEO of the Environmental Financial Consulting Group, is a trusted advisor to many environmental consulting firms. “He is one of my mentors,” Laska says.

- **Staff.** “If I am not listening to the people I work with on a daily basis, then I am not paying attention to the world in which I live and the sandbox where I play!” he says.

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