



## Survival of the Fittest

### Introduction

My family has been in the construction business for close to 100 years. I've followed in the footsteps of my great grandfather, grandfather, and dad. I have learned about accomplishment, leadership, and responsibility. I have paid for these lessons. I've also had plenty of luck along the way and moved up in the world further than I ever could have imagined.

Now I'm trying to give something back. I am trying to inspire and help others to go further than they can imagine. That's the main thing I hope you'll get from reading this book.

My family history is rooted in the grit and challenge of the job site, and that's the tone I've put into this book. It is a book written for you, in your language. And though I use the term "guy" throughout, it is for every man and woman who will serve the union construction industry.

The advice I have to give is based on my experiences both on and off the job. Not all the lessons are easy; in fact, most of them aren't. This business can be tough, but the rewards of accomplishment, pride, and financial security are worth it.

Now, I know some guys don't like change, and will do anything to avoid it. If you're one of those guys, you're probably not going to like this book very much. So I apologize in advance, for any offence taken, by anyone who isn't ready, willing, and able to join in the fight for union construction.

On the other hand, if you are offended, tough shit.

Mark Breslin

### Navy SEALS, Setting the Bar, and You

Winning teams come in all different stripes. And uniforms. For example, let's look at the Navy SEALS and the National Guard. Both are branches of our country's military. So what's the difference? Only this: the skills, attitudes, and behavior required for success. Both require discipline, focus, and commitment, but for the SEALS the bar is set high. Very, very, high.

More than 80 percent of the guys that apply to become SEALS quit during training. That's because that ultra-high performance bar is out of their reach. They don't kick you out of SEAL training. You ring a bell, take off your helmet and walk away. You quit, because you found out that you don't belong. The bar was set for the organization, and you could not reach it. And let's face it; even the guys who wash out are probably hardcore to begin with. But even that's not enough. The ones who make it are totally committed to being the best of the

best. They want to be something special. They want the pride that comes from being the most elite warriors in the world.

- So what does this have to do with your job? Let's ask the hard questions:
- How high is the performance bar set for you?
- For how high is it set for your fellow workers on the job site?
- How many guys on the job aren't reaching that performance bar?
- How many in your union aren't reaching it?
- Do you put up with weak performers on the job?
- Is the bar adjustable in the fight for Survival of the Fittest?

Being the best is not for everybody, and that's OK. But if you're not sure about the level of commitment you're willing to make, you should think about it long and hard. Union construction is supposed to be the best in the world. Not "good," not "above average," but the best. The thing is, the height of the bar is not just up to your foreman or superintendent; it's up to you. If you want to be an elite warrior in the fight for our marketplace, you need to set your own bar very high and expect it from everyone around you.

## **A Few Good Men (and Some Not-So-Good Ones)**

The Survival of the Fittest applies to every job site in North America. Elite warriors are there, along with guys who might not belong. The difference between the best, average, and just plain lousy can have a huge impact on where you fit and what you earn. After you've been around a while, you start to see the differences.

Let's take a look at a few categories on most job sites:

### **Elite Warriors: The Top Performers (5-10 percent)**

The top 5-10 percent of rank-and-file field guys will have no worries most of the time they're in the union. They'll always have jobs, they'll always be in demand, and they'll always have employment. They might get paid over scale. They may be tapped to move up to foreman or superintendent. They might get a truck. Contractors will often keep the elite on the payroll even when there's no work, just to keep from losing them to another company. These might be tomorrow's contractors. This is their reward for being top performers, for having the best skills, attitudes, and behaviors.

### **The Good Guys: Middle Performers (30-50 percent)**

The middle 30-50 percent are the "good guys" on the job. On time, fine attitude, and good skills—that's what the good guys are all about. They have what it takes to be good journeymen. They're valued by their employers. They're dependable. They're not always pushing their limits or building new skills, but they can be relied on to move the job forward.

### **The Fill-In Guys: Marginal Performance (20-30 percent)**

The fill-in guys make up another 20-30 percent. Fill-in guys get most of their hours when it's busy, and they usually don't stay with a contractor very long. This group is weak in some basic area of skills, attitude, or

behavior, and it shows. They're never "lead-men" on the job. They'll get fewer hours overall unless the market is totally booming. They're close to the last guys hired and usually the first to be laid off. This group ranges from average to below average in their skills, behaviors, and attitudes.

### **The Bottom:** Poor Performers (5-10 percent)

The bottom 5-10 percent are a problem. They generally lack the skills, attitudes, and/or behaviors to be successful in our business. Most of the time they don't even know it (or don't want to know). They hurt the image of union construction every day. They're the ones employers are thinking about when they're wondering why in the hell they should have to pay higher union wages for such lame-ass workers. They're keeping us all from "growing the pie." They go from employer-to-employer and job site-to-job site because they either have bad attitudes or they just can't get it done. Maybe the real problem is that they just don't care enough.

Ask yourself this: which category am I in today? Ask yourself which category you want to be in. Ask yourself what you need to do to move up?

### **The Guy Next to You Needs to be a Winner**

When you look at these differences in your fellow workers, you need to think about how it impacts you. Does it piss you off sometimes that you're making the same hourly rate as the guy next to you who couldn't even tie your shoes? Well, guess what? You've got a much bigger problem than that right now. That guy may have a lot to do with how much you make years and years from now.

Union contractors pay a certain amount per hour, which is determined through the bargaining process with the union. Most of the time, all the guys on the job will get paid pretty much the same. Think about it for a second -- are contractors going to want to pay more than what the worst guy on the job is worth?

Looking at it from the other direction, do you think they'd be willing to pay more if everybody had stronger skills, higher productivity, and better attitudes? I'm guessing they probably would. So when you look at the guy on the job next to you who's not pulling his weight, you've got to ask yourself this: "Is he helping to increase my next raise, or is he holding it back?" There's no in-between.

### **A Winning Investment in You**

Making and molding an elite warrior is not cheap. It takes a bucket of cash to train an apprentice through journeyman. After you weed out all the dropouts and duds (10+ percent in most crafts), it's not unusual for unions and contractors to spend from \$10,000 to \$30,000 to graduate an apprentice. Yeah, I know—it costs that much to go to college! And you don't even get to go to keggers!

Still, it's a great education, no matter how you look at it. Every year, unions and employers spend hundreds of millions of dollars to train the workforce. That's a hefty price tag for making you the best in the world. In return, you're only asked to do one thing. And if you haven't figured out what it is by now, do us all a favor—toss this book and go get a job driving a bus.

(And the answer is: To be one of the best union construction journeymen in the world)