



THE BENCHMARK

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A year of opportunity

Invariably, all of us sages are queried with: “You’ve been around the country. You see things. So, what kind of year is 2014 going to be?” Like we know...

We do have opinions, though, and mine is very upbeat. I make it a priority to stay on top of industry benchmarks and information sources, not the least of which are the *The Wall Street Journal*, *Engineering News-Record*, Kiplinger, investment newsletters and the like. Together, with what we experience around the country, I like what I see for us contractors in 2014.

Allow me to bore you with a few statistics:

- ▶ Coming out of 2013, commercial building was up 24 percent;
- ▶ Home values rose 14 percent in 2013;
- ▶ Housing starts are projected to rival those of 2006;
- ▶ Unemployment hovers between 6.5 percent and 7 percent, with a falling trend; and
- ▶ Most economists agree the gross domestic product will grow by nearly 3 percent in 2014.

I’m not ready to say the economy is robust, not quite yet, anyway. We have our challenges. Think of labor shortages, upward pressure on the minimum wage, pricing that has yet to recognize the rising cost of doing business, the Affordable Care Act’s company mandate (which takes effect in 2015) and inflation still measures less than 2 percent, which is a sign of a struggling economy

I’m sure, like you, I can flip-flop back and forth on the various bell cows affecting our economy—good, bad, whatever. The point is, for the first time in a long while, 2014 offers a year of opportunity not seen in many years. The winds of advantage are in our favor.

So, how do we handle the challenge? For one thing, we don’t sit back and think for a moment good things are going to happen simply because we’re nice guys. No. Rather, we enlist the proven, age-old five-step process for success:

▶ **Plan.** We need a plan of attack for the year. It could be our vision, our budget or our ideas molded cohesively into a meaningful direction. This plan

will identify the results and will offer step-by-step actions to be accomplished in the journey to achieve the goal.

▶ **Involve our people.** Who are any of us without our people? I would argue our employees are our greatest assets, and without them our goals would simply be a fleeting dream. Deliver our plan to our people. Create assignments. Establish timeliness. Coach. And, hold each one of our team members accountable to fair and measurable goals.

▶ **Execute.** As the leader of our team, we must lay out a plan for execution: Who will do what, with whom and when? It’s a natural process. We set the goals, we issue assignments, we provide the instructions, and our people will follow our lead.

▶ **Track.** What’s a plan without a tracking system to see where we are and to anticipate where we’re going at any given moment? If we don’t have one, we must create the system to track the results of our vision as we move along. Determine where the faults are so they can be improved and identify the wins so they can be embellished. Celebrate the wins and fix the “owies.”

▶ **Discuss the results and replan.** Here’s that people thing again. Daily/weekly we want to discuss where we are and the in-course adjustments we wish to make. If a portion of the plan is not working, correct it. If it cannot be corrected, work around it. The critical element is not to lose track of our ultimate goal. I recall the old saying, “It’s hard to remember the goal is to drain the swamp when you’re up to your ass in alligators.” It’s cute and says it all: Do not lose focus.

This is the first year in some time where outside forces are minimized. We’re in control of our destiny. Oh yes, we will have hurdles to clear, no question, but for the most part those hurdles are in our control. The recipe is simple—plan, involve, execute, track and replan. We all can do this. The opportunity is there for each of us to make 2014 the best year in recent history.

Cartoonist Walt Kelly said it best in a Pogo poster and comic strip. “We have met the enemy and he is us.” This is our year to win—make it so!