

executive engineer

QUARTERLY SUPPLEMENT ABOUT LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT



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Fast track into management by going overseas

Having spent a large part of his career overseas, managing director of Leighton Contractors **Peter McMorrow** believes working in outposts early in your career exposes you faster to more responsibilities. His growth into management was a steady progression of jobs with increasing responsibilities.

by Dietrich Georg

Peter McMorrow's rise to his current position as head of one of Australia's largest construction companies has been a steady progression of jobs with increasing responsibilities. A civil engineer from the Western Australian Institute of Technology, now Curtin University, he became managing director of Leighton Contractors in 2004.

He acquired his leadership and manage-

ment skills "on the job", with only a few personal development and specific training courses along the way.

He believes his commercial astuteness was partly innate and partly learned. His affinity with numbers helped him develop his financial skills.

He attributed a significant influence on his management skills to some of his bosses, whom he admired and from

whom he learned by watching and experiencing first hand how they operated.

"Working with good people is going to produce good results; working under somebody who is a good operator is very beneficial," he said.

McMorrow started an MBA course a year after his graduation in 1971, but gave it up five months later. "Embarking on a MBA course so soon and with little business experience was far too early."

After just having spent four years on his engineering degree he wanted to get into the workplace and apply all that theoretical knowledge he had gained. Did he consider resuming his MBA studies later in his career? "I never went back to it and never thought about going back."

Instead, early in his career the company he was working for at the time sent him on a "grid" course, a personal development course in which participants interact with one another and then place each other on a grid correlating their people skills with outcome focus. McMorrow was perceived as strongly outcome-driven.

Three years ago Leighton Contractors sent him on a Mount Eliza course. But this was not for the purpose of grooming him for a particular role. It was part of the company's ongoing leadership development program, under which senior managers are sent regularly on such courses to assist them in understanding more about themselves and their style of interacting with other people.

The Mount Eliza course included feedback from other participants, psychological tests and half a day with a psychoanalyst.

McMorrow was assessed as being mature and able to apply different approaches to different situations depending on the task and circumstances, thus achieving better outcomes more often than with a rigid approach.

As for areas to improve on, he is mindful of finding the right balance between driving for results and seeking input from others, and being open to amend goals in line with that input.

"Communication is very important," he said. "It's hard to overcommunicate but easy to undercommunicate." He prefers to communicate verbally rather than in writ-

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ing and sees emails often as "a pain".

"It takes a lot of time to sift through my email, when often things can be dealt with faster by phone."

His regular reading outside directly work-related material is mainly the *Australian Financial Review*, with *Engineers Australia* magazine also on his list to keep informed about what is happening in the profession.

Another area McMorrow is mindful of is striking a healthy balance between work and family life. "I could do better at that," he acknowledged.

The company recognises that the work/leisure balance is an important issue for staff and for the industry as a whole. It has introduced some programs to address

the issue. For instance, rosters have been changed so that people on construction projects can leave on weekends, whereas in the past "if you were on a project, you worked on it all the time".

McMorrow, who turned 56 earlier this year, studied engineering "more by accident than by design". His sister's boyfriend at the time was an engineer and, being good at maths and physics, he thought it seemed like a good idea.

He received a scholarship from the WA Department of Main Roads in Perth and after graduating went into bridge design. He managed day labour gangs soon after he started his first job, at the age of 22.

In 1974 he decided to get some overseas experience. He took leave without pay

for 15 months and worked in the Middle East and Britain.

In the Middle East he worked for local consulting firm Dar Alhandasah in the United Arab Emirates on a road project to Amman. "I supervised a Greek contractor and we were living in camps in the desert, which was quite an exciting experience," he said.

In Britain he worked for Tarmac on the A66 road building bridges. He was in charge of the construction crew, which gave him valuable experience while still at a young age.

Back in Western Australia with Main Roads, he was put in charge of two contracts. These gave him his first introduction to Leighton Contractors which was the



McMorrow sees as one of his most significant achievements the dramatic improvement in Leighton's safety record in Hong Kong against local pessimism that it couldn't be done.

construction company for both contracts.

He joined Leighton at 26, once his scholarship bonding to Main Roads had finished.

Leighton sent him to the Tom Price mine expansion in the Pilbara. He became project manager, with one of the projects being a residential subdivision with hundreds of lots. "I didn't have any formal training in project management and learned as I went. That was a baptism of fire."

At the age of 28 Leighton sent him to the Philippines for an aid project in a joint venture with SMEC. He worked as a construction and maintenance engineer which was not a management position. "It was more a lesson about life, because the Filipinos faced so much adversity and kept

bouncing back."

A year later McMorrow left the Philippines for a large project in Hong Kong. He became project manager of a \$20 million reclamation job, which gave him his first exposure to marine work.

In 1981 he left Hong Kong and joined Thiess Contractors in Queensland. Within 12 months Thiess became part of the Leighton group and McMorrow took on his first management role of a profit centre. He was 32. This job signified the shift in his career from engineering into management.

During his time in Queensland he got married and had his first child.

In 1984 he joined Hornibrook in Western Australia, which was the beginning of a few challenging years. "The company

was not in good shape and I had the task of turning it around."

In 1990 McMorrow returned to Hong Kong with Leighton Contractors and stayed for 11 years. He started as civil construction manager building business in Hong Kong, the Philippines and China.

In 1997 he became general manager for Hong Kong, China and the Philippines.

In 2003 he came to Sydney after two years back in Western Australia.

McMorrow's advice to young engineers who are interested in going into management is, not surprisingly when looking at his career, to travel and work overseas. "Working on remote jobs often means that you become a bigger cog on a smaller wheel. You are given more responsibility at a younger age."

McMorrow sees as one of his most significant achievements the implementation of a safety campaign in Hong Kong. "We drove the campaign hard even though the locals were telling us that it

wouldn't work in Hong Kong. But I had the support from the managing director, which meant the campaign came right from the top.

"Staff started to realise that safety was being taken seriously and under-performance would affect their pay and their promotional prospects. We gradually convinced most staff of the importance of safety and after three years our safety record was 10 times better than the industry average."

In his leisure time, McMorrow likes to paint, so far mainly in water colours. He recently did a large portrait of his daughter in charcoal and he also wants to venture into oil paints.

He also plays tennis and loves spending time on his boat. ●