

STORY RELEASE

SEABISCUIT A Long Time Ago

A long time ago when I was a kid my brother and I were stuck in the back seat of the family car as we made the trip from Willits, California, an old logging town where we lived, to the big town of Ukiah about thirty miles south with a population of around 7,000. My brother and I used to peer out the window to the west of Highway 101 at a white fenced dirt racetrack stuck way down in the valley. You could barely see it through all the gnarled oak trees. We tried to imagine why it was there. Over the years I traveled that road hundreds of times and on each trip I would look down and see the white painted fence of the oval track. No one ever paid any attention to it and the rumor was a famous horse used to train there. Two years ago I drove the same road, and when I got to that very place, I looked down and tried to spot that track.

Recently I picked up Laura Hillenbrand's Seabiscuit: An American Legend and a short way into the book Hillenbrand describes Charles Howard's purchase of the Ridgewood Ranch just south of a logging town named Willits. On this 17,000 acre spread Seabiscuit was trained and then healed to race again. The very track I had looked at for over forty years. Little did I know that in the valley there was a story of inspiration and hope.

The movie about Seabiscuit, a descendant of the great thoroughbred Man o'War through his son Hard Tack, is on the surface about a short awkward thoroughbred horse with knobby knees, and about Johnny "Red" Pollard, a tall and considered heavy accident prone jockey; a trainer, Tom Smith, who was a lone plainsman living in solitude who had accepted his fate, and Charles Howard who became very wealthy only to find grief. Seabiscuit ties them together and gives them a purpose, and in the end, they heal each other, and win. The movie is really about self-reliance in tough economic times, for hanging in there, for second chances, for seizing the moment, and for saluting the little guy that never gives up. What a lesson for people. What a lesson for business.

In business, in the construction business, in the architectural business, in the engineering business, leaders must lead. But even leaders are subject to pressures of their job for at times the demands of leadership can be staggering. But true leaders know that they must hang in there, they must look for the second chance, they must recognize and seize the opportunity, and must never give up. That is why they are leaders.

The strategy of leadership is extremely important in managing a business. Leadership is about winning, and winning is about perseverance even on the muddiest track. Here are some strategy steps that will help you and your team get to the winners circle.

- **Always have a Plan**
- **Develop a Team**
- **Look for Opportunities**
- **Pick Your Races**
- **Know the Competition**

Always have a Plan: This is the most important part of winning, for when you have a plan, it means you have a goal. Now I know from the seminars I have done that many companies do not have a plan.

I also know that eventually when they do run into a problem they sometimes don't even know it because they do not have a way to measure what is happening. With a plan in place you will have the ability to constantly measure performance, and be in a position to quickly make changes when you must. If your strategy is to develop a medical niche and you constantly place in the pack, then something must change. A business plan is not set in concrete; it's a series of benchmarks on your way to success. Think of it as the clubhouse turn and the quarter pole.

Develop a Team: You can't do it alone. Someone must ride the horse, someone must train the horse, someone must feed the horse, and someone must pick the races. You must assemble a team of players each one responsible for one area of the business. For a construction company, your team would include your comptroller, chief estimator, your head of administration, head of design if you are design/build, as well as business development and marketing person, head of field operations and a superintendent. These people represent your management team who will be charted with the responsibility to Champion various company objectives.

Look for Opportunities: In every economy there are always opportunities. Sometimes you have to sit down and say, what's working and what's not working. Where do we go from here? Maybe it means changing the way you deliver services. Maybe it means focusing on a particular market niche. Whatever it is, the company that constantly has the ability to evaluate and to make changes is the same as a horse moving up in class, or changing the distance. Adversity for some is an opportunity for another.



Pick Your Races: This is different from looking for opportunities. Picking your races means you constantly monitor all the variables regarding a particular project and pick those projects where you SHOULD be the selected contractor or the architect as you have the best credentials for the project, or the ability to have the best price, or you have the best designer for that type of project. Capacity means you can't do everything. Capacity means you must pick your races to maximize your opportunities.

Know the Competition: You must know who you are running against. Watch out for Silver Slipper as he is a last minute charger and will race you hard at the end; Youngblood is a fast starter but can't hold the distance in the last furlong; and Postagedue will swing wide on the turn and give you an opening. Meaning, if you know who your competition is, and know their strengths and weaknesses, then you can pick your races and have a better chance to win.

Setting up this infrastructure does not guarantee success, but it makes perseverance so much easier when you have a structure and a team in place. This structure provides the leader with that much more freedom, as it really is a management tool. Perseverance means that when something doesn't go your way, it means to you, that you are just that much closer to what you want. Seabiscuit wasn't considered a great prospect. Likewise, in the end, your company may be viewed like that ungainly boxy scrapper with stumpy legs that wouldn't straighten who became one of the most remarkable thoroughbred horses in America. Your competition might be saying, "Where did they come from." Many companies are often considered not to be contenders, but in the end, you just might win, for the same reasons that made Seabiscuit a winner.

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McKenzie also is president of McKenzie Marketing Group, Inc., a national strategic planning/marketing company that helps contractors develop a positioning advantage through marketing and business development planning. McKenzie, a registered architect, also is co-author of *Successful Business Plans for Architects* published by McGraw-Hill, and publisher of *Strategic Thinking*TM a monthly newsletter. He can be reached at (630) 894-0513, or ron@constructionpeergroups.com. More information about peer groups is available at www.constructionpeergroups.com.



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