

# BUILDING A FIRM-WIDE BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT CULTURE

May 15, 2025



# Introduction

- My background
- Learning environment
- Participant profile



# MY PERSPECTIVE

- Have taught ACEC Massachusetts' Emerging Leaders (ELs) class on Business Development for 18 years
- Faculty member of ACEC National's Business of Design Consulting
- Have presented many workshops for AIA, SMPS, NSPE, AGC, and other industry organizations
- Have conducted numerous in-house BD training workshops for PMs and other project personnel, ELs, and leadership

# Learning Objectives

# Learning Objective

**Understand** and appreciate the economic/organizational drivers for establishing a firm-wide business development (BD) culture.

# Learning Objective **2**

**Debunk** 4 myths about BD that do the AEC industry a disservice.

# Learning Objective **3**

**Recognize** what to look for when identifying future BD talent.

## Learning Objective

**Create** a thoughtful and effective professional development program for emerging BD leaders.



## Learning Objective **5**

**Carve out** customized BD contributions for each employee that are consistent with the individual's functional role, career juncture, and BD acumen.

# FOUNDATIONAL DEFINITIONS

## Marketing

Anything you do to create and drive the demand for your services.

## Business Development

One-to-one relationship-building to identify and convert leads into new business.

# Foundational Definitions (cont.)

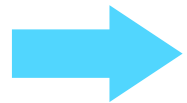
## Client Sector

- Group of clients/prospects with common wants and needs.

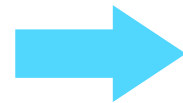
# Importance of Having a Strong BD Culture

- Can be an important differentiator
- BD process is a proxy for project delivery
- Relying on a few people with high BD acumen puts your firm at risk
- Smooths out revenue peaks/valleys
- Influences project delivery, recruiting/retention, career advancement

# BD Process: Greatest Challenges



Nonlinearity



Long gestation period



Difficult to measure ROI  
of specific strategies  
and actions



Balancing utilization/billability  
targets and other demands  
on time

# Psychology of Business Development



- You ***must*** be yourself!



- Avoid taking “rejection” personally—“They’re making a mistake by not hiring our firm.”



- If you don’t ask, you won’t get!

# Inherent Challenges

- BD isn't typically taught in technical academic programs.
- Technical professionals often thrust into BD roles in which they lack requisite skills.
- Most firms still not hiring with an eye towards BD.
- A number of myths/misperceptions about BD.

# Debunking BD Myths

- Business development = cold calls
- You have to be a slick, smooth, glad-handing schmoozer
- There's only one model for successful BD (a.k.a.—"Male Golfer")
- Knowing what to say is more important than knowing what to ask
- # of business cards gathered/LI connections is directly proportional to BD efficacy/ROI



# BD Keys to Success

- Be genuine
- Be curious and inquisitive
- Be assertive:
  - If you don't ask, you won't get
  - Follow up till closure
- Stick to your word

# BD Litmus Test

**HOW DO YOU VIEW A RELATIONSHIP?**



# Do you have the client's best interest at heart?

- Do you focus on *their* needs (i.e., the issues that keep *them* up at night)?
- Can you suspend your agenda and truly listen?
- Do you engage the client/prospect in the problem-solving process?
- Do you provide advice, resources, and/or best practices?
- Do you ask provocative, inquiring, open-ended questions?

# Identifying Future BD Leaders

- **From within—cream does rise to top:**
  - Client satisfaction
  - Growing a client relationship
  - Involvement in professional associations (beyond membership/attendance)
  - Interest in participating in networking events
  - Interest in the firm's business strategy
  - Interest in mentoring/helping people

# Identifying BD Leaders (cont.)

- **Don't discount introverts:**
  - Observers and listeners rather than talkers
  - Subject-matter experts who like to “go deep”
  - Curious people who enjoy learning
  - More comfortable when they feel prepared
  - May not be flashy and recognition-seeking, but gets job done!
  - Potentially significant contribution to existing/past client development

# Introverts Take Heart

**THOSE  
TRAITS CAN  
BECOME BD  
STRENGTHS:**

- ➔ Listening, curiosity, solid preparation are key skills for identifying/understanding your clients'/prospects' needs
- ➔ They're also strong leadership skills: "6 Truths on Why Introverts Make Great Leaders"—*Entrepreneur Magazine*

# Introverts and BD: The Challenge

- ▶ Many introverted professionals feel reluctant or uncomfortable taking on BD.
- ▶ Firm leaders just as reluctant—focusing efforts on more extroverted staff:
  - “Square peg into round hole”:  
Need to leverage strengths of *everyone*!
  - “Nature vs. nurture”
  - *USA Today* poll

# Identifying BD Leaders (cont.)

## ► Hiring:

- LI profile/resume—what to look for
- How they handle the interview:
  - Research and prep
  - Asking probing Qs and listening
  - Follow-up



# Developing Future BD Leaders

- ▶ Formal training (e.g., customized in-house skill-building workshops with ample opportunities for active learning)
- ▶ Informal mentoring and coaching

# BD Training: Key Concepts

- Market positioning vs. BD...and how the two work in synergy
- Debunking BD myths
- Psychology of BD

# BD Training: Key Concepts (cont.)

- BD tools:
  - Features vs. benefits
  - Probing questions
  - Elevator speech
  - Networking (client-facing venues; effective use of LI)

# BD Training: Key Concepts (cont.)

- Strategies for strengthening existing client relationships
- BD meetings/calls:
  - Scheduling
  - Preparing for
  - Conducting
  - Following up

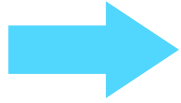
# BD Training: Key Concepts (cont.)

- Identifying/handling typical objections for hiring your firm
- Win/loss debriefs (how and why?)
- Time management strategies

# Informal Mentoring/Coaching

- ▶ Accompanying established sellers on BD meetings
- ▶ Fly on wall for various scenarios:
  - Unhappy client
  - Happy client:
    - Trying to sell more work/new services
    - Trying to identify additional potential folks to meet in other parts of the organization

# Suggested Approaches



Encourage emerging leaders (ELs) to identify a passion and then train them on how to apply their energy to this particular topic.



Create an EL BD group and provide training on BD best practices.



Strategically adjust utilization targets for emerging BD leaders.  
(Can't just tell them to do more!)

# Carving Out Contributions for Everyone

**CUSTOMIZE BD  
CONTRIBUTIONS  
AND GOALS  
TO FIT:**

Functional Role

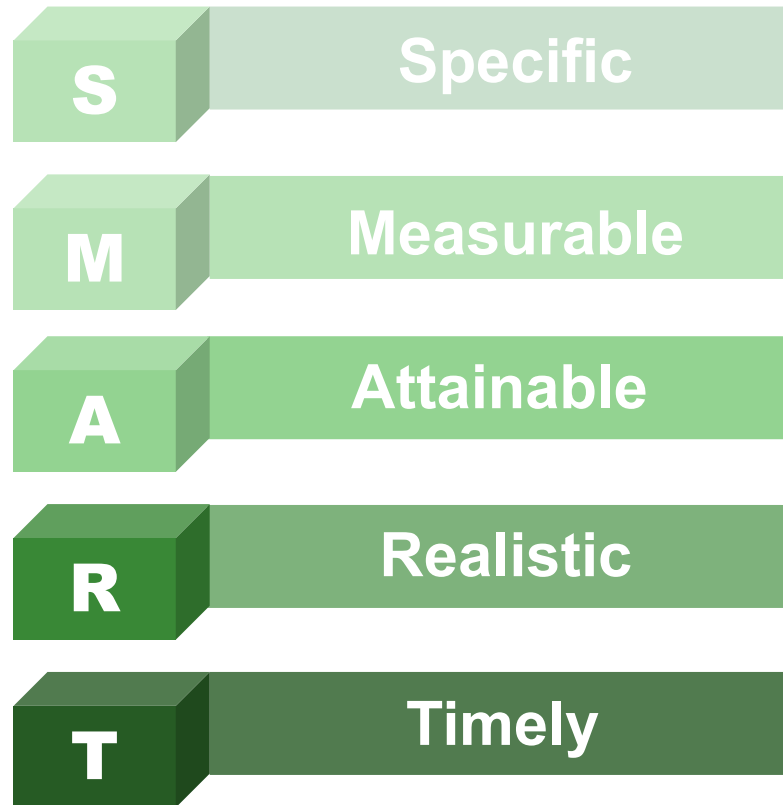
Personality

BD Acumen

Career Stage



# Are Your Goals SMART?



# SMART Goal Setting: Examples



- To enhance my public speaking/presentation skills, join local Toastmasters group by July 10 and begin attending meetings.



- By August 21, contact 3 past clients to check in and practice asking probing, open ended Qs.



- By September 13, identify 2 target professional associations and attend at least 1 networking event.

# Accountability: Developing BD SMART Goals

- ▶ Develop 3-5 personalized BD SMART goals
- ▶ Sample categories:
  - Deliver business/market intel to my team
  - Become involved in client-facing associations
  - Check in with a past client each quarter
  - Ask clients probing Qs
  - Identify additional influencers/decision-makers

# Connecting the Dots...Key Takeaways

1

- “Seek first to understand, then be understood”—Covey

2

- “The client doesn’t care how much you know until they know how much you care”—Adapted from FDR

3

- If you don’t ask, you don’t get! (What’s the worst thing that could happen?)

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# THANK YOU