# It Doesn't Have to Be So Lonely at the Top

**Article Published August, 2005, Construction Executive**
**Volume 14, Number 7**

**Ronald Cohn, David Ralston**
**Ralston Consulting Group**

Dr. Ronald Cohn and David Ralston are senior consultant and managing partner respectively for the Ralston Consulting Group, a 20 year old organization development firm. They specialize in helping people work together in many different industries through many services including executive coaching, team building, leadership development, work process redesign, and strategic planning. They can be reached at rcohn@getralston.com or dralston@getralston.com, their company website at www.getralston.com or at 801-328-1820.

Of the many leadership adages, "it's lonely at the top" is quite well worn and for good reasons. Those at the top must make tough decisions, have the ultimate financial responsibility and are the primary interface with the board. In addition, they often operate from a set of beliefs that can keep them feeling isolated – "it's all on my shoulders." Yet, many top construction executives and business owners have made it lonelier than it needs to be.

Steve Hamilton's experience as president/CEO of Orem, Utah-based Western Star Construction, a commercial concrete contractor, helps paint the picture. As he recalls it, "I started the company in 1984 with four employees. I had my hands in every part of the business and made all the decisions and it seemed to work. We grew over time to 75 employees but I continued to operate in the same way, pretty much going it alone," he says.

"I felt all the responsibility. It was mentally fatiguing, and I finally realized that I couldn't continue to shoulder the burden alone."

With the help of an organizational development consultant, Hamilton learned that his self-imposed "loneliness" was not only stressing him out, but also creating challenges for his top people. They resented being underutilized. What began as one of Western Star's strengths—a strong, decisive, entrepreneurial leader – became a liability. Hamilton had fallen into the classic owner's

trap that as the company grew, all roads still ran through him.

So how can top managers avoid this? The first step is for managers to challenge their beliefs and assumptions. Does it really all have to be on one person's shoulders? Who can I confide in? While the answers are never black and white, a number of options can be considered.

For example, one part of staying stuck with the "it's all on my shoulders" phenomena is a style of managing only through one-on-one interactions with direct reports. The benefits of having one-on-one meetings are well documented: time to review progress and problems of individual responsibilities, relationship building, and coaching opportunities. What it does not do is create the synergy available across the highly interdependent construction functions – leaving the CEO to make all the related decisions, shuttle important information across the organization, and plug the inevitable gaps.

The leader's alternative to one-on-one management is to establish and develop an executive team where all key department heads work together to help run the business. Such a team serves many purposes – strategic and operational planning, business development, project planning, guiding improvement efforts and collaborative estimating. And while each department head remains ultimately responsible for his area, the collaboration across construction functions leads to managers operating from the same strategic and tactical goals, running projects more smoothly and feeling included on the team.

Heston Hamilton, estimating director for Western Star Construction, is one beneficiary of his company's newly created top team. "We are now discussing items that only the president historically paid attention to," he says.

"To feel a part of the decisions and to release the president from doing it all has resulted in more responsibility for all of us, greater personal satisfaction, and a 39 percent company revenue increase," he says.

**Creating Group Responsibility**

Changing from individual responsibility to team responsibility requires that the president be willing to engage everyone collectively in making company-wide decisions.

People will be naturally wary when expected to participate after historically operating primarily on their own and delegating the resolution of various issues upwards. The president needs to communicate the new expectations, and how the new style will really work. The president also can begin to confide in the team, creating a much more human and connected experience.

Hamilton moved in this direction by first establishing a team meeting and rotating leadership. The team decided the meeting format, the agenda and how frequently they would meet.

A few months into the change Hamilton said, "Initially it was a bit difficult. People would still look to me as the final decision-maker and I had to continually say on most issues, 'it's our call, not mine.' After a few meetings, they realized that I was serious and they began looking to each other to solve their issues, and not just coming to me."

"I can now take a vacation without worrying, and have more time available for bank and bonding relationships," Hamilton says.

What now emerges is a significantly less "lonely at the top" feeling along with a sense of shared responsibility. Equally important, is what happened at Western Star and other companies that have made a transition to team orientation – an increase in company profitability. Now that's a real win-win!