Episode: 50
Eddie Campbell

THE
MOBILE
WORKFORCE
PODCAST

Mike Merrill:
Hello. Welcome to the Mobile Workforce Podcast, sponsored by AboutTime Technologies and WorkMax. I'm your host, Mike Merrill. Today, we are sitting down with Eddie Campbell. Eddie is the chief operating officer at ABSI, which is a steel building and modeling company for industrial and commercial industries. He's also a host of The Construction Brothers Podcast with his brother, Tyler, so that's super cool. Today, we're going to talk about the pre-planning process for construction, how to manage those challenges and problems that come down through the trickle-down effect, and also how construction technology enables better collaboration on the job sites as well as off the job sites. Then of, course, how that all impacts and improves company culture overall. Hello, Eddie, and thanks for joining the podcast today.

Eddie Campbell:
Yeah. Thanks for having me. We're really excited about being here, man.

Mike Merrill:
Yeah, it's going to be an awesome conversation. I'm actually in Beaver Creek, Colorado, just outside of Vail at an event today, so a little different background. Apologies for the hustle and bustle of trying to get this thing rolling from the road, but I think we're in good shape.

Eddie Campbell:
No, we're good. Good for you. Sounds like a fun trip.

Mike Merrill:
Yeah. Yeah, it's actually a CFMA event. We've had the CEO of CFMA, Stuart Binstock, on the podcast a couple of different times. Had some great conversations. We at WorkMax and AboutTime love CFMA and everything they stand for. I'm not sure if you're familiar with

that organization, but it's definitely a good one for construction.

Eddie Campbell:
Yeah, very cool.

Mike Merrill:
Love it. Well, first off, let's just talk about this planning process that contractors have to continually face, and of course, the way that that impacts their projects that are coming down the line. What can you share with us about those challenges?

Eddie Campbell:
Yeah, we like to say that we are at the bottom end of the construction food chain, that we're generally the subcontractor of a subcontractor of a subcontractor sometimes. I mean, we really are the end of the road. By trade, we're using BIM to generate shop drawings. We're working under steel fabricators, sometimes engineers, design-builders, general contractors, but because we're in this sub-tier position, we say we're on the bottom of the pond looking up.

Because of that vantage point, we're able to look up and see a lot of the flaw in the industry because all of those decisions made and all of those things that have been done to cast the dye and set the ball in motion for a project, well, they eventually stop somewhere. When you're at the bottom, well, stuff rolls downhill and it usually rolls downhill until it gets to us, so I mean, when we're taking a project apart and trying to do our portion of the project and we're picking at it, and trying to make things work, it's easy to look up and see how poor planning, poor structure, too much reliance on technology, in many ways, poor collaboration, poor communication, end up impacting a project in a negative way. In many times, we see it delaying schedule and things not going to plan. Nobody likes being there. It's supposed to go to plan, it's supposed

to be built just like the general contractor planned, like the owner expected. When you set it up wrong, it's very hard to achieve those goals.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah, so when you run into those snags or challenges, how would you describe that trickle-down effect that can balloon up and, and be a problem down the road? Do you have a good way to describe that for the listeners?

Eddie Campbell:

Yeah. Well, in some ways, what we see, the devil's in the details a lot of times for us. When things are left undone or pushed off for later, many times that is going to have a much larger impact on the project than it should have had, things get blown out of proportion. We like to look at the structure of things a lot and look at how are things set up. We've got this steel detailing thing that we do now. We're really in this LOD 400/450 BIM realm, right? But the background's in general contracting. My dad's a general contractor, I've got my contracting license, so the heart is really living in that general contracting realm. We've worked around a lot of the architectural engineering firms, so we see what they're doing. Then we've been able, even through the podcast, to visit with owners and see how projects get initiated.

Everybody's got to do their part, right? The owner has a part in setting a project up, making sure that the project is viable, is being well-planned, that they're hiring good designers, that they're setting up good pay structures. What we've seen from our vantage point is as these things don't happen and things start to unravel, we get what we like to say, is behind the airplane. When you're flying behind the airplane as a pilot, that's a bad deal, right? You want to stay in front of the thing that's happening because when things start going down in the air, that's not good. Things start to move very fast on you. We see project managers, that seems to be the standard M.O. is just rather than getting in front of it, rather than planning it, rather than thinking, "I'm going to take a tactical pause and I'm going to think about what we're about to do," it's go. Go, go, go. That really comes to the detriment of projects. It's just not rounding out the thinking on something before we do it.

Mike Merrill:

Hmm. Do you think that's a construction thing? Do you think that's a people thing? I mean, what do your experience tell you about that?

Eddie Campbell:

Mike Merrill:

Yeah, I like that term, "Let it out in the wild." It's like in construction, we want to see the dirt flying and the hammer swinging and we can't wait to get that project going to feel like we're actually moving forward, so I think you're right.

Eddie Campbell:

Yeah. Little anecdote. It was two days ago, we got a call because the general contractor's really wanting us to do some laser scanning for them, and so we are going to go out to site, do some verification of what's been put out, and the general contractor's reasoning for trying to accelerate at the project is that the owner was going to make a site visit and the owner needed to see progress. It wasn't strictly to actually complete the project, it wasn't to hit a milestone that was on some schedule, it was just that the owner thinks we should be vertical by now and we're not, so we have to show some action. Scheduling in itself a lot of times turns into that, it's box-checking, it's hitting those nodes that come out on the critical path schedules, just making sure that I show some kind of action.

A lot of times, I mean, we can flail, we can move our arms real fast and act like we're running fast, but that doesn't mean that we're actually going somewhere fast, so yeah, it's a problem, but I would say it's not an easy one. It takes some self-discipline and it's going to take some industry discipline for us to figure this out. That'll open doors for a lot of the modular, a lot of the kitting, all that DFMA stuff that people talk about, Design for Manufacture and Assembly, all of that stuff bleeds out of better planning, which, I mean, that touches anything from the environmental concerns we have to the efficiency concerns we have because we're terribly inefficient as an industry.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah, it's tough to build things. When you got so many hands in the pot, it's a communication thing, right, a lot more than skills.

Eddie Campbell:

Yeah, I mean, it's pretty well statistically blown out that we are the most inefficient industry and that gets parroted again and again and again. The question I have is: What are we doing about it and then what are we pointing our finger at and saying, "Well, maybe that's the root cause"? How are we getting back to the root cause instead of just throwing a bandaid on the symptoms? Some of those root causes are interesting.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah, your point about the planning, I mean, one of my favorite quotes is to fail to plan is a plan to fail. I believe in that and I think that has to do with life, not just construction or building or running a business, but it's everything you do, you really should have a thought-out plan before you really engage in something that's of any importance.

Eddie Campbell:

Well, sure. In some ways, that's kind of a self-serving ax for me to grind because a lot of BIM, that is planning, right? That is, "I want to pour more detail into the BIM," and here we are, we do detailed BIM, so it's like, well, that's kind of a self-serving thing. But I mean, we've seen it work, right? We see projects that are well-planned. We see documents that are good documents. We see designers that have had the time to do their job. Then we've seen the byproduct of when an owner or general contractor leans on a set of designers and makes them do their work too fast, or I mean, we had a project we were working off of, get ready for this, 30% documents. I mean, I didn't even know we really issued much of anything at 30%, but 30%, and we're actually progressing towards construction. I think revisions have gone from like revision 12 to changing to letters and we're now on M. It's insane. How can you hit that moving target?

There's all that, but then there's another side of it, which is maybe less self-serving and more just when you talk to people on a podcast, you get to have the

benefit of learning. I don't know how that's going to go for you today, but for me, when I have people on my podcast, I get to learn, and when I get to do that and I just get to soak in, it's amazing how many really, really intelligent people are out there in construction and how many people have different perspectives because there are just so many different realms that we come from in construction, so I could put my finger on BIM or technology or anything like that, but that's just one little facet of it. We're trying to steer the whole thing. I mean, contractual structure, the way we all work together.

Eddie Campbell:

There's a group out on operator system 2.0 for the construction they're calling OS 2.0, which is looking at these things, like how do we contract with one another? How do we pay each other? How might we integrate blockchain into how we get paid so that it's not like 90 to 120 days before you get money so that contractors aren't ...? I mean, the leading cause of contractors going belly up is cash flow, right, so how do we have verifiable and good subs? How do we look at the insurances that we're requiring and making sure that we've not doubled or tripled up on insurance, isn't over-insured a project, or underinsured it? Just the whole ecosystem of construction needs a good, hard look. I mean, there are plenty of things that we can point a finger at, but lot of that really is just stopping and thinking before we move forward and building that next thing. But that's hard. I mean, the world moves fast and people need things, and it doesn't necessarily feel great.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah, right. Yeah, I agree with you on the point that we can learn a lot from those guests on the podcasts. I definitely, I learn every episode. I love those new perspectives and I think getting a global picture of the whole process and getting a handle on that is something that I've really been able to do, even more than I was ever able to do as an acting general contractor because my head was buried. I was working on my projects, I was worried about my stuff. Worrying about the industry and the economy and all these other things that impact what I'm doing were way back in my mind. I just wasn't aware enough of those things and I think getting that extra perspective is critical for

the modern contractor to be efficient and to compete and to remain profitable and solvent.

Eddie Campbell:

Yeah. I mean, hats off the project managers out there, too. I mean, that's a tough seat to sit in. I mean, if you've sat there, you know. It's easy for me to, from the outside looking in, say, "Well, you're behind the airplane. You need to plan better and that'll just solve your problems," but when you come in for the day with a plan and then the firefight starts at like 6:30 in the morning and you're like, "Well, I mean, I guess any plan I had for my day has now gone away because this is a legitimate emergency," it's easy to turn into more of a fireman than anything and just feel like that's what your day is, just putting out one after another.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah, I think, and to your point, I mean, there's a balance. I mean, we can plan until we're blue in the face, but eventually, someone does have to move some dirt, someone does have to swing a hammer. We have to. Aiming endlessly doesn't ever fire anything. I mean, you got to pull the trigger. I think the big thing, and I know I learn this on our podcast all the time with a lot of guests, and you probably hear it, too, but I don't know necessarily. I think the software and the technology is better than ever. I think we have an overabundance of tools and resources to help us. I think the people are still the variable in this equation, don't you?

Eddie Campbell:

Oh, yeah. I couldn't agree more. That is, I think, the crux of our problems, it's our ability to grasp that there is improvement that we need to make and that it's not just going to come at the hands of some tool or technology that we have, that our ability to talk with one another to empathize with one another to work together, to actually work as teams. I mean, we hear the teamwork and collaboration, all of the buzzy things that we're just done hearing, like, "Oh, my gosh, they said it again," but it's so true. We are still working at trying to, instead of building a building in spite of each other, build a building with each other.

I mean, how many times does a general contracting team, or even an owner, get done with a project, sit there and think about everything that went down, and say, "Man, I really wish I could do that again with those people. That was awesome. I really…" You might have pockets, you might have a few, but I mean, very seldom are we like… Most projects are, "Thank God it's done. On to the next one." I mean, just creating more positive experiences by having people work together, I mean, that's the core of what we're doing, right? We're just trying to get people to align for a common goal.

We had a really cool story from Mr. Lee Evey, who was put in charge of the Pentagon renovation and was actually there during the 9/11 event. To hear that man talk about how he brought people together and aligned them, his whole thing, and he delivered this job, I mean, it was… Man, what were the stats? It's a billion-dollar project. I think it was like a hundred million under budget and a year ahead of schedule. I mean, it's insane to think about somebody doing that. The guy was a psychology major and some of the other things he was involved in was negotiating with the Russians for the International Space Station and its usage. He was a government go-to guy for special projects and then they turn him on the Pentagon Project. He's got no previous experience in construction and then he has this rave success story.

Why? You ask him, and he is like, "Because I aligned people and I got them working for a common purpose and I helped them to see that what they do every day is really dang cool. You get to build something today and someday you're going to drive past this with your kids and you're going to say, 'Hey, I helped build that.'" It doesn't matter if you just place some rebar in the end of it, I'm sorry, if you were on the Pentagon Project, you will drive by it with your kids and say, "I helped build that."

If we get that mentality out there a little more, get alignment, I mean, to hear that kind of success story out of somebody that's not a construction theoretician, he's just somebody who knows people, psychology degree, special education degree, and this guy brings people together in a way that's so significant that he's got a dream job by the end of it. This thing's storied. I mean, that, to me, yeah, I couldn't agree with you more. That is a story that is just proof that when you can get people to align, that that is the key.

It's funny, that same guy, Lee, was telling me a lot of times he'll walk away from speaking engagements where people that are in technology ask him to speak because they come to them and they're like, "Lee, you did this amazing thing on the Pentagon Project. Tell me about the special technology that you used. Tell me about the special tools. Was it BIM? Was it BIM? Did you use some sort of new material? Was there something?" He's like, "No. No. It's just good, old-school aligning the people and good, old-school leadership." Yeah, the tools are awesome. Technology's great. I love it. I use it every day and I geek out over it, but it's not the answer.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah, that's amazing. Well, in that regard then, really, construction, I mean, yeah, the materials and the tools to do things have changed quite a bit, and mostly just more efficient, but the communication side of things is, like we said earlier, it's just people working together, just communication, having empathy, recognizing that the project doesn't revolve around you, so to speak. Yeah, that's a great story. I hadn't heard that one before. I will have to look that up and learn a little bit more about it.

Eddie Campbell:

Yeah. I mean, buckle up. It's about a two-hour episode, but I think worth the price of admission. Hearing that and learning the lessons from it and thinking about where we're at, it gives me some hope that I do think that rather than being a complainer in the industry, trying to be an agent of change, being a voice that's encouraging the people around, "Think, plan, try to operate together, align, use technology as a tool, but don't believe that the tool is the craftsman," those are big.

I'll go you one more. This is kind of a personal theory, so you can take it and do what you will with it, but okay, so as business people, the career cycle that we go through is very fast now in comparison to our predecessors. My grandfather, who was a civil engineer and progressed through Messer Construction from being a carpenter to being a senior project executive, was there for 40-something years, like 45 years, right? The projects he was handed and the projects that he managed, I mean, he was five to 10 years older

than I was when he started getting large projects to manage himself.

His tenure was something of remark. He stayed in the craft. Many times, we're promoted and promoted and promoted and promoted because we're trying to get to the goal of retirement as quickly as possible: "I want to be done with this." In a day gone by, people didn't have quite the same mentality about that, and they learned their craft and they expected to be there a minute. There was pride in being in a carpenter, there was pride in be a pipe-fitter, and doing that for a career where the expertise that lived there in those realms was immense. I don't want to over-glorify what's gone by. There are so many ways we've improved and we've come a long way in so many things, but it's tough. I mean, when were you first named a project manager? I'm curious. At what point in your career? How old were you?

Mike Merrill:

I was probably 23. I started at about just out of high school, so I had a few years' experience by then, but yeah, I was young.

Eddie Campbell:

You're 23 years old. I mean, this is what we see. A lot of times, these are the people around us that were dealing with. I had shop drawings rejected and returned the other day at the hands of a project intern that had been in a company for two months with a lot of highly technical verbiage that... I mean, it was youth and zeal, right, so there's something to be applauded there. That's awesome. I'm like, "Go get it, man. Don't lose that fire." At the same time, there's something to be said for tenure and being able to hone your craft and be a builder and that's something that I know we've come to again and again and again: Love construction, love building, and actually want to learn your craft and learn your trade.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah, and something that I don't think we can put too fine a point on, even construction, I mean, yeah, it's about the building, it's about the project, but really, it's about the people. I mean, you're providing for families, you're providing incomes, you're providing

safety, you're providing healthcare, you're providing food, I mean, all these things. The project's just the excuse to have that experience all occur, and then you're providing for a business, a place to generate profit and to feed their employees' families. I mean, it's about people. This whole thing's about people and I think that companies that don't lose sight of that, and I keep learning that on the podcast, company culture and some of the things, communication and working together, like you said, having teamwork and collaborating and being proud of what you're doing because it's the right thing to do as you work with others is something that makes all the difference in the world because at the end of the day, it's just steel and concrete and drywall and wood and it's lifeless.

Eddie Campbell:

Yeah. I'm at the doctor's office, it's probably a year, year-and-a-half ago, and I'm talking with this guy, he's a general physician. We're just talking, it's a checkup, whatever. I asked him a question. He just came back to me, he said, "Like 99% of my job is telling people things they should already know: Get enough sleep, eat right, try to reduce your stress." It was just things that you learn in middle school health and you're like, "Oh, why do I have to even sit here?" But the truths are there: Exercise.

In construction, I don't feel like the things that make us successful are so high and lofty and far off that we can't attain them. In some ways, the things that we need to be doing are kind of like the simple fundamentals of life, like treating each other fairly, like treating the person across from you the way that you would want to be treated would be a huge one. There have been businesses built off of that that are incredible, Ritz Carlton being one that springs to mind, treating people fair, not lying to one another, "Do the right thing" is something you just said which really triggered that in my mind.

There are some fundamentals that I think would really go a long way, that if we all operated under those terms, the contract would come out a whole lot less, the lawyers after that would come out a whole lot less, people would get paid on time. We'd show up when we said we were going to show up, or have a viable reason for why that was excusable for us not to do so. There are just some basic things that, I mean,

project schedules would be much easier to maintain if everybody did what they said. It would take a lot of variable out just not getting lied to about when the guy was going to get to site. I think some basic fundamentals would really help us out as an industry and I don't think they're unattainable and that's why I think just, "Hey, just keep encouraging people." Let's do that thing, let's be those people, and let's not be the industry that's earmarked for the worst efficiency. Let's get out of that.

Mike Merrill:

I love that. Great advice. What role do you think the owner plays in all of this process? Because I know depending on the owner, this totally changes the attitude and the approach of the project and how it's managed and whatnot. What do you think? What are your thoughts there?

Eddie Campbell:

Yeah, I think the owner sets the tone for the project in so many ways. I know the architect or design-builder, I mean just depending on how you structure things, they set a tone for the project. But I mean, think about how projects come to be and then think about what "owner" means. "Owner" might mean a college, "owner" might mean a hospital that build a lot, right, and they've got probably building programs and people that handle this thing, owners/representatives that are very savvy. "Owner" could mean a doctor. "Owner" could mean a homeowner, I mean, there's just so many realms, right? Then how we come about, how do we initiate a project, I mean, that could be I have an actual thousand-page document that defines exactly how I have to initiate a project when I do it because I'm within this giant organization/midcap company that makes me do it this way and I will check all of these boxes and I cannot do this, or I'm in this state and the board of regents says, and it goes all the way over to that one-time builder at the golf course mentioning to a buddy, "I've been thinking about build my own office."

The initiation of those two projects are vastly different and the trajectories of those projects are vastly, vastly different, and so does the owner have a role in setting tone? Yeah, you better believe it. That's why having an industry with discipline will help this problem. I don't think that we can point and say, "Hey, owners, do it

this way." I mean, to advocate for just one process, different projects will require a different process, and I think we need to acknowledge that, that one process may work better for one project than another. Coming up with ways to advocate for owners and help them identify that before they go build a building might be a really good project for somebody to undertake to just be there.

I'm not talking about being an owner's organization. We know a few and they're great and they do a lot of really good advocacy, but I'm talking about a place where somebody who wants to build a building can find a lot of good information about that in a format that helps coach them through maybe best processes that's unbiased and doesn't have maybe a reason for existence that comes from profit. I don't know, just a thought, and really, some free-wheeling thought at that.

Mike Merrill:
Yeah, no, it's a great insight. I haven't often thought about that or heard it discussed where the general contractor or the subcontractors are approaching a project specifically based on that owner and their goals and their intent with the project. I mean, yeah, you'll hear conversational comments or, "Oh, boy, this guy's a real... He's a weenie," for lack of a better term, or whatever it, has their personal-

Eddie Campbell:
That's cleaned up.

Mike Merrill:
... their personal opinion about somebody and, "Hey, here's your warning," but really, stripping all that emotion away and just being practical about it I think's a pretty wise thing to do when you're approaching the project. Say, "Hey, look, here's the important goals for this owner. Here's what we got to really focus on. This guy really wants to see this progress, and so we got certain benchmarks we need to hit. As long as we can do that, we're going to be fine, and we'll have the latitude we need to do things the way that we feel like they need to be done and be done properly and efficiently and all that." But yeah, I think having a meeting like that about each owner would be a

really effective way for companies to have a better experience.

Eddie Campbell:
Yeah, just having a generally published place, I mean, we've got a lot of trade organizations that are advocating for a specific process, right, so trying to define a process that is agnostic of the right answer, is okay with whatever the right answer is and helps map that path, that could be useful for all of those different people that happen to find themselves with the owner hat on.

Mike Merrill:
Well, this has been a super fun conversation. I have just a couple more questions before we wrap up. We're probably going to have to do this again because I don't know that we really got to the root of all the good stuff that we could talk about. I guess just wrapping up, what's the one thing you would hope the listeners would take away from our conversation today?

Eddie Campbell:
If I could come back to anything, any one point, it would really be the people thing, particularly that golden rule that I think a lot of positive things happen when you treat somebody else like you'd want to be treated because it puts you in their chair, makes you empathize, and I think not only are you going to do better business, I think you're going to feel better about yourself while you do it.

Mike Merrill:
Well said. What's something you're grateful for in your professional life?

Eddie Campbell:
I am very grateful for the investment of people that knew more than me when I was young, people that mentored me, specifically my dad. I'm in a family business. My dad has poured into me and I really appreciate him and I really appreciate my team because I get to be surrounded by a group of people that I like and that I really enjoy doing this thing with. I appreciate my bro, too. The thing we get to do with the

podcast, the work we've gotten to do together is just very cool, so those are things that are very near and dear to me.

Mike Merrill:
Yeah. Family always is a special additive to the recipe, no question about it.

Eddie Campbell:
Yeah.

Mike Merrill:
Cool. Well, lastly, what is Eddie Campbell's superpower, if you just had one to pick? I don't need the whole list, just one.

Eddie Campbell:
My superpower? Well, you'll probably laugh at this, but I love kids. I love kids. My wife and I have six of them, so one of my favorite things to do is just be around and cut up with kids, make them laugh, and see them as people. When I'm able to do that, it makes me feel really good about myself because it's just a good way of making sure that you see a person for a person, no matter how big or small they are, no matter how important they are or what they could do for you. That kid might not have anything to offer you, no way of furthering your career or doing anything like that, but man, if you can make one of them belly laugh, that's got to be a superpower is making a toddler belly laugh. I don't know of too many noises in the world that are cooler than that, so hey, maybe a cutey answer, but I'll go with that one. I like it.

Mike Merrill:
I love it, man. I think that's fantastic. It may be one of the best ones I've heard so far. That's cool. I love kids, too. I got four of them not six, but good work.

Eddie Campbell:
Right on, man. That's awesome.

Mike Merrill:
Well, thank you again for joining. This was a lot of fun. We'll have to definitely do it again and connect up down the road. I'd really love to line something up if you're down.

Eddie Campbell:
Yeah, definitely. No, thanks for having me, man.

Mike Merrill:
Cool. All right. Well, thank you very much, Eddie, and thank you to the listeners here of the Mobile Workforce Podcast, sponsored by AboutTime and WorkMax. If you enjoyed the conversation that Eddie and I had today, we would love to have you give us a rating and a review, hopefully five stars, that's our favorite one. Of course, share the episode with your colleagues and friends. After all, our goal here is not only to help you improve your business but your life.