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Whitestone Group

IN GOOD HANDS

The Whitestone Group and John D. Clark Sr. seize opportunities with a can-do attitude

BY JAYNE GEST | JGEST@SBNONLINE.COM

With a simple idea 16 years ago, John D. Clark Sr., president, CEO and founder, has turned The Whitestone Group Inc. into a multi-million dollar business with 1,400 employees, thanks to hard work, word of mouth and a strong reputation. “You have to work at building a better relationship with your clients, he says. “That means more communication and less emails,” Clark says. “Everybody hides behind paper, but then you have to take context of what they are saying out of text.” Pamela A. Gentile, the former COO of Whitestone, also had a philosophy that Clark says the company still adheres to: “If we service our customer so well and always treat them as the most important client, they will always be our client.” A security company that provides security personnel and asset protection services, including at Cleveland’s 2016 Republican National Convention, Whitestone specializes in securing infrastructure for the U.S. government. The company handles more than 70 sites, while working for 17 different agencies.

“In this type of business your reputation is as critical as your performance.”

—JOHN D. CLARK SR., PRESIDENT, CEO AND FOUNDER,
THE WHITESTONE GROUP INC.



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Clark says they originally worked on the corporate side, investigating and securing difficult situations.

A big break came after Whitestone did a job for Cirque du Soleil when it was in Columbus. The circus felt Whitestone had done a better job than anyone previously, Clark says, and eventually Whitestone was brought in for a national contract.

Around this same time, another corporation hired the firm to help with a major strike. Whitestone ended up working for that business for about nine months.

“There were newspaper articles written that they brought in the U.S. Marshals to work this strike — and it wasn’t, we just dressed appropriately and conducted ourselves correctly,” he says.

In other words, his security team conducted itself in such a way that at first glance, it appeared to be law enforcement.

“In this type of business, your reputation is as critical as your performance,” Clark says.

You have to constantly be on top of your game and communicate to try to head off problems.

In government work, he says you work from five-year contracts, but you will be rated once or twice a year to see if you’re living up to your commitment. It’s more rigid than private sector work, but people are people, he says.

“You’ve got to run a good ship and you’ve got to control,” Clark says.

No matter what

When your company is provided an opportunity for growth, you and your people need to respond, no matter how challenging that might be. You can’t take no for an answer.

After 9/11, a petroleum company called at 4:30 p.m. on a Friday. Clark says they were told they were the first person to

answer the phone — and when your name is at the bottom of the phone book, you’re not the first one they call.

“They asked if we could come out and talk to them in the morning, or even this evening, and we told them we’d be there in an hour and a half,” he says. “We went out and we secured that site, immediately that night.”

It’s no accident that Clark has a copy of “The Little Engine That Could” in his office. Clark also says you might hear senior staff say at meetings: “Never say something cannot be done. There is always a work around or another way to get the job done. It may be challenging, but if it’s important to our clients, we will find a way to do it.”

Although, Whitestone would have liked to get involved in government work sooner, he says the company was still too much of a fledgling entity in the early 2000s. Whitestone’s first government contracts weren’t awarded until the firm

worked with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Treasury and Department of Veterans Affairs in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Having the ability to take on a big contract quickly, however, has always been Whitestone's strength. Clark says the company has been fortunate to take over several contracts where other people have failed, with sometimes as little as 24 hours notice.

"Yes, you do struggle to be able to pull things together sometimes at the last minute when it happens like that," he says. "But we've always had the attitude in the company that nobody takes no for an answer. Everybody steps up to the plate and does the job."

Work around obstacles

That never-say-no attitude was tested when Whitestone was awarded a major Federal Aviation Administration contract during the recession.

The company was picked to secure sites in 27 states and two U.S. territories. Whitestone was hired because it had the best business plan to standardize the equipment and training.

The contract was for \$78 million, if fully executed, but Whitestone needed a \$5 million line of credit. Clark says all of the banks said no. They said they felt the situation was too unsure, but he believes it was more a case of not being familiar with government contracts.

Rather than give up, Clark and his team found a workaround by going



THE CLARK FILE:

NAME: JOHN D. CLARK SR.

TITLE: PRESIDENT, CEO AND FOUNDER

COMPANY: THE WHITESTONE GROUP INC.

Born: Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, but grew up in Cincinnati

What was your first job and what did you learn from it? My first job in high school was being a bus boy at Mariemont Inn, near Cincinnati. I started there in the seventh grade. I learned that I didn't want to give butter to ladies for a quarter. I'd get tipped because I'd go get them extra butter or I'd get their cigarettes.

I said I want to be the gentleman sitting the chair for the future. But it was a good learning experience. I worked there three years.

What's the best business advice you've ever received? It's interesting — some of the best advice I ever received was when I was standing on the tarmac at Air Force One with President George W. Bush at the foot of the stairs. It was about being a leader, but I don't want to share the specifics.

My mother, Stella Clark, who owned a restaurant for years, also gave me some great advice. As early as age 8, whenever I was at the restaurant, she made sure I shook hands with everyone. Her advice: When you shake a man's hand, you've got to look him in eyes. She raised me to believe that my word is my bond.

What do you like to do when you're not working? I live on a farm. I have horses. I work out; I do a lot of boxing, as part of my training. But just relax, and enjoy the family and enjoy the grandkids.

to a factoring lender for a year. Then, Whitestone built a relationship with a bank that understood government contracts and how the Beltway of D.C. worked.

While the financing was the hardest piece of the FAA contract, Clark says they

also needed the right people.

Whitestone had roughly 30 days to get the logistics together for 53 locations, and 60 days to transfer everything over. The retired colonel put in charge of the project told Clark and his COO that they couldn't do it. They didn't have the infrastructure, computer programs or banking.

Clark says they told him, "That's not your problem or issue. Your job is to get the job done."

Everything ended up going without a hitch — without the retired colonel.

"It's the maintenance and the culture that we have, and the people — how we focus to get the job done, no matter what it takes," Clark says.

You can create this kind of culture through ownership, pride, passion and holding people to standards, he says. Fortunately, Whitestone has a core of people who go the distance — and help drive that culture.



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But you need to keep high hiring standards for your people, if you want to stay true to that mindset.

For example, Clark says Whitestone had recently received close to 70 applications for two new jobs. Some of the existing employees have the skills and training to stay on under the new contract, but of the 70 applicants, about 35 percent wouldn’t even pass the background check.

With growth, empower

Since 2010, Whitestone has grown almost 372 percent. Clark says you can take advantage of tremendous opportunities if you have a great product and deliver what you said you would.

He believes in putting together the best, hardest-working managers you can, even if they don’t necessarily know the industry itself.

However, with growth comes the need for increased infrastructure and processes. Whitestone has had to invest in proposal writers, a contract team, HR, operations, logistics and inventory, as well as software systems.

“A lot of our people wear multiple hats, and we’re able to pull together our complete resources,” he says.

To go to that next level, you need the proper programs in place to keep your company solid, Clark says. It’s about being efficient and streamlining.

The company also won its first overseas contract, which means those investments need the ability to be used outside of the U.S.

With the growth, Clark has started to delegate more. He listens to his department heads and leaders in the company, as well as new beginners to collect ideas.

With a de-centralized organization like Whitestone has grown into, you want to build a structure from the ground up that



feeds back into your corporate operations center, he says.

“It’s like a starfish. You can have the head, but you have to have strength out in the tentacles to be able to make decisions,” Clark says. “You have to empower people to do the right thing. You have to have the right people to make those decisions.

“Then when they run into difficult situations, they go to the correct department and they get it corrected,” he says.

Clark also has found that in some areas, it’s better to outsource.

“We’ve found in our proposal area that we’ve had to contract out to get the best writers in the country to write for us, because that’s a very difficult curve to be

able to train people, to bring them up to the standards of the level that we’re moving into,” he says.

The company is going to continue to find the right mix, as it looks into growing overseas.

“Our branding, our name is out very well across the country, and we’re just trying to continue building a good organization,” Clark says.

“Whitestone would never be what it is without the commitment of our team and knowing we were making a difference,” he says. “If you aren’t making that difference and helping others, you are missing the point of business.” ●

How to reach: The Whitestone Group Inc., (614) 501-7007 or www.whitestonegroup.us

Takeaways >>

Safeguard your reputation, as much as performance.

Meet all challenges with the right attitude.

Your core people drive the culture.