

Interview with Marc Papke

Project Manager Downer NZ

Marc Papke is a leader, decisive, inspiring, motivating, empowering, collaborative and humble.

This, according to the young engineers working on his current project, a 13km stretch of complicated highway in Christchurch, New Zealand.

“Marc gives us the tools and lets us get on with it, he trusts and empowers us but is totally approachable. He presents solutions and delegates. He leads by example” said Tim Belsar, Site Engineer at Downer NZ.

I sat down with Marc in Christchurch to discuss his career and thoughts on teamwork and leadership.

Marc has lived in six countries, working on hydro projects, tunnels, airports, buildings construction, river stabilisation, wind farms and highways. Graduating in 1981 with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Construction Management from North Dakota State University, he spent time in America on deep tunnel and hydro projects before travelling to Russia to work on building an American Embassy. This proved to be one of the most challenging roles in his career. He was the first person on the ground, with limited language skills, no local partner and a mandate to get a diverse team up and running in a short time.

He learnt a lot.

Marc says meeting this challenge formed the basis of every project he has worked on. ‘The challenge of a project manager is moulding a solid functioning team with people from all walks of life and backgrounds’. The secret he says is getting to know people quickly, understanding their strengths and weaknesses, how they fit in, and how to keep them satisfied so they can perform to their highest ability.

After Russia, came New Zealand, West Africa and Australia. Most jobs have come about from working relationships. “It’s all about relationships creating success’ he says.

A typical day begins at 5.30am. When he can’t jump out of bed with enthusiasm to lead the team for another day he will retire.

I asked him what makes a great leader. “One who leads from the top, won’t ask someone to do something they won’t do themselves and puts their team first. As my youngest daughter once told me, there is no ‘I’ in teamwork” he said.

His advice for young engineers?

“Work hard, work smart, be flexible, adaptable, resilient. You will work far more hours than many of your friends, so love what you do.”

Compelling words from a man who clearly loves what he does and follows his own advice.