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Mentor/protégé program helps build success for smaller firms

Company owner takes former employee under his wing

Richard Copeland is a living example of “paying it forward.” As the owner of THOR Construction, one of the largest African-American-owned construction companies in the U.S., he mentors other minority business owners who want to learn how to build their businesses and successfully compete for work on large construction projects like Central Corridor light rail.

Copeland started THOR Construction in 1980 with a used pick-up truck. He convinced Northern States Power to hire him to do restoration work after utility installation. From those humble beginnings, he gradually grew his company into a 125-employee enterprise with three-year-average revenues of \$150 million.

“We had our share of successes and failures, and we learned from both,” Copeland said. He credits his longevity to his mentor, Howard Weiner, a venture capitalist who worked with Copeland for 20 years. “He saved me from the verge of bankruptcy a couple of times.”

Opening the door for smaller businesses

On a recent afternoon, Copeland sat in his office with Gilbert Odonkor, a former employee. In 1999, Copeland gave Odonkor a break like the one NSP had given him. Odonkor, a native of Ghana, had just finished a construction management degree at the University of Minnesota.



Richard Copeland, owner of THOR Construction, left, is mentoring Gilbert Odonkor, owner of YAW Construction.

“I tried to get in the door at many other companies, but the doors were closed,” Odonkor said. “And then someone told me to call Richard.” Odonkor got an interview, and was hired on a provisional basis. Copeland liked what he saw. During the period, THOR got a contract to work on the Minneapolis Convention Center expansion. Odonkor served as project engineer for two years.

“Gilbert was here to see what transpired in real time in our company,” Copeland said. “His experience here, coupled with his drive, his intelligence and his desire to replicate what he saw...he has parlayed that into one of the most successful offshoots of our company, and there are many.”

But rather than seeing Odonkor as a competitor, Copeland is teaming up with him in a formal mentor/protégé relationship that will help Odonkor compete for contracts on

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the Central Corridor. Designed by the Federal Transit Administration, the mentor program “strengthens the capacity of DBE firms to grow their business and build a portfolio of skills,” explained Wanda Kirkpatrick, director of the Metropolitan Council’s Office of Diversity and Equal Opportunity.

Copeland and Odonkor have signed a formal agreement that is specific to the Central Corridor project. (Mentor/protégé relationships can also be designed to cover a certain time period.) The agreement details the specific areas of training that will occur in the relationship. Yaw Construction, backed by THOR, hopes to pour concrete on both the Civil East and Civil West portions of the Central Corridor – a contract THOR had on the Hiawatha Line.



Workers for YAW Construction pour sidewalk in front of the federal courthouse at Fourth and Robert streets as part of the utility relocation work in downtown St. Paul.

Benefits ‘cascade throughout our community’

“I want to be a mentor because my company has been afforded opportunities to participate in big projects because of our minority status,” Copeland said, adding that it is important to him to “turn around and help others to be successful.”

Odonkor is grateful for the opportunity to learn more from his mentor. If they land the contract on the Central Corridor, Yaw will be growing quickly. “Richard has great management skills, and will help us set things up for growth,” Odonkor said. “He’s done it all.”

Copeland also said he is reinvigorated by working with younger protégés. “It is very rewarding that Gilbert came from here,” Copeland said. “We’re friends, and I’ve got a great deal of respect for him. He’s done a good job of going out and getting work, and he’s formed great relationships with other contractors.”

“If we don’t give others in our community opportunities, it won’t happen for them,” Copeland said. “I believe in what we do and replicating what we do. The benefits will cascade throughout our community.”

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