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The “Shaw Method”

How to Succeed in Business While Building a Profession

BY DAVE ANDERTON, ACF

Bartow Solomon Shaw Jr. The name is a mouthful. But then, there’s a lot to talk about. While the practice of forestry started a hundred or more years ago with the likes of Pinchot, Schenk and other notables, forest management for the average landowner did not really take hold until much later in the 20th century. Bo Shaw was among the group of forestry consulting pioneers including Eley Frazier, Bill Sizemore, Dan Gelbert and others across the U.S. that brought professional forest management and business decision-making tools to middle-America’s landowners.

Just to get this out of the way up front, this article is designed to pay tribute to the profession, the man and his company. To complete the full disclosure disclaimer, I am proud to say that I am being mentored by Bo Shaw today and may be somewhat biased in that regard – but, let the chips fall where they may and history will be the judge!

Bo graduated from the Clemson School of Forestry with a BS in 1963 and Duke University School of Forestry with a MF in 1964. After serving his tour as a pilot in the Air Force, he returned to Sumter, S.C. in 1966 to start creating this new business model. The profession of forestry consulting and timberland management was still in its infancy in 1966. At that time even fewer landowners than today (if you can believe it) were convinced that they needed the advice of a professional to sell timber and manage their property for long-term goals.

Bo is quick to say that the first business lesson he learned was from his parents and that lesson was to “maintain solid relationships with your clients and associates and put their well-being first.” The second thing he will tell you, as will many successful consulting foresters, is that “you cannot get it done without the support of your wife and family.” I’m sure Bo’s wife Vickie would agree.

Bartow Shaw and Associates started as most forestry consulting businesses did at that time. A kid with a love of the outdoors who was raised with a connection to a family sawmill or a farm decided to make a difference in his community and provide value-added services to landowners. The individual consultant was the forester, the mapping specialist, the biometrician, the salesman and whatever else was required on any given day. If there was a job to be done and the client paid in American dollars (or at least promised to pay), then a handshake was made, a new client was procured and the business grew.



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Most successful consulting foresters, then and now, follow this pattern of hard work, providing a service that landowners ultimately value in a manner they may not have conceived of the day they first hired "their forester." However, at some point between the late 1960s and the late 1970s, the Shaw Method began to take shape.

As with most small businesses, hiring new employees is a big deal. The old adage "one rotten apple can make the whole barrel stink" did not come about by happenstance. The firm was adding clients and additional help was needed to maintain the high level of customer service required by Bo. As the need for foresters grew, Bo made a decision to hire the best individuals available, regardless of university pedigree, train them in the Shaw Method and turn them loose to grow the business. These early employees hailed not just from his alma maters Clemson and Duke, but from USC, UGA, Syracuse and NCSU, setting the trend of accumulating a diverse group of head-scratchers to provide input at company meetings. Bartow Shaw and Associates grew to become Shaw, McLeod, Belser and Hurlbutt, Inc. having been incorporated in 1979.

Where the Shaw Method diverts from the path taken by many other forestry consulting firms is two fold. Bo Shaw always held forest management and forestry consulting in the same regard as other professional services industries – accounting, legal advice, architecture, forestry; all members of the professional

services community. As such, employees for SMBH were expected to conduct their business in a professional manner with their client's goals as their first priority. In addition, Bo took this a step further – at least for the forestry consulting community. He began the process of hiring personnel with an eye towards growing the business over the long-term and offering ownership in the company to senior employees. And Bo offered not just minority ownership but equal ownership.

The second prong of this two-fold Shaw Method is strategic planning and tactical implementation. Now I know this seems simple and pretty straight-forward, but it is harder to do than you think while actually growing the business in a financially prudent manner, preserving client trust and satisfaction, and at the same time, reaching out to incorporate new client services into the forestry tool bag.

With regard to the first of the Shaw Method practices mentioned above, equal ownership did not necessarily mean equal compensation – but it did mean you had an equal voice in management decisions. The concept of hiring good personnel, giving them increasing responsibilities as they learn the business and ultimately providing them with an opportunity to share in the risks and rewards as the business grows proved to be the perfect method to keep the core management team in place through the ups and downs typical of any business growth.

When it became apparent to Bo that SMBH did not have personnel on staff

with the talent, *time and desire* to guide a growing enterprise through an increasingly complicated set of decisions relating to health insurance, vehicle purchase policies, personnel management and other non hands-on forest management activities, Bo decided it was time to hire a general manager or operations officer. David Pritchard, whose experience was primarily from the forest products industry, was hired after the scouting reports came back describing him as a fiercely loyal team player dedicated to his job and hard-headed enough to give an honest and straight-forward answer to anyone in the chain of command, regardless of the outcome. Within a relatively short time, David was the SMBH president – we hired our boss.

To expand on part two of the Method, strategic planning and tactical implementation have always been a crucial part of the Shaw Method since the early days of Shaw Forestry. While having a plan in place to address issues of the coming year is always important, looking ahead five years and devising a plan to reach long-term goals was equally important.

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These five-year goals were not simply: 1 – grow the business, 2 – improve customer service, 3 – increase employee training, etc. Strategic planning had to include specific and achievable targets along with specific steps that would be taken to work towards those goals.

SMBH had its initial strategic planning retreat in the spring of 1989 and a plan was put in place to continue moving the company on its growth path. And then Hurricane Hugo hit dead center on the South Carolina coast and plans were put on hold. The company went into crisis mode to salvage as much as they could for their clients in the aftermath of the hurricane's devastation, and that crisis mode continued for the next several years until some semblance of normalcy returned to forestry in South Carolina.

Strategic planning continued in the early 1990s and the opportunity to provide services to the forest products industry, which was beginning to sell timberland and reduce forestry staff, as well as the burgeoning TIMO industry fueled SMBH growth for the next 10 years. During this time Bo was an active member of the American Pulp and Paper Association's executive board. As a result of attending these AF & PA meetings as the lone non-industrial member, Bo was able to make long-term business connections with people like Rick Holley (Plum Creek) and Carter Fox (Chesapeake Corp.) and expand SMBH's ability to understand the changing business arena to prepare for future business opportunities. And again, taking advantage of the opportunity to "get the right people on the bus," Bo was able to convince Carter to become a member of the SMBH Board of Directors upon his retirement. The company now had an additional set of eyes with a different life experience to ask the question "why are we doing it this way?" Board meetings were never the same – and that was a good thing.

As the company moved into the 21st century, SMBH had the opportunity to purchase Canal Forest Resources, the consulting arm of Canal Industries, from the parent company. Strategically, this allowed SMBH to gain expertise in forestry data management, increase the company's footprint across the Southeast

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and increase the diversity of the company's client base. In 2001, the merger of the personnel and opportunities presented by these two companies became American Forest Management, Inc. (AFM).

Referring back to phase one of the Shaw Method – hiring the right people and providing equity opportunities in the aftermath of the acquisition of CFR, Bo identified Robin Jolley as the future of AFM's Investment Services group. This group is tasked with forward thinking, looking for new opportunities and being the "rain makers" for AFM. Robin mentored with Bo and eventually became AFM's CEO.

In 2007, another opportunity presented itself as a part of the deconstruction of International Paper's business model. IP's consulting forestry subsidiary, Sustainable Forestry Technologies (SFT), was made available in a similar manner as was Canal Forest Resources several years earlier. Again, as with CFR, the acquisition of SFT provided additional strategic services, expanded the company's footprint and client base and added some outstanding personnel enabling AFM to maintain the quality of service and dedication to clients that are the foundation of its success.

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As we move into the second decade of the 21st century, the Shaw Method is about to turn a new corner. The forestry consulting company formed by Bo Shaw has grown from one employee to 30 employees to 100 employees to 230 employees in 40 offices and 15 states – all under the watchful eye and guidance of Bo Shaw.

Bo has put into place the right people in the right slots to give the company the best opportunity to move forward: Roy Belser, chairman of the board and Bo's long time partner representing continuity from the early days; Robin Jolley, CEO, and looking forward and David Pritchard, president, getting the company through everyday challenges. Talented folks all, but it takes all three to replace everything Bo had been doing.

At the AFM Board of Directors meeting this past May, Bo was honored by employees, family and friends as he officially retired from AFM. He remains on the board of directors, continues to be a stockholder and, of course, will always retain his title as founder.

The Shaw Method has created the largest forestry consulting company in the U.S., and the onus is on current management to honor the Method and continue to grow the business. Fortunately, Bo will still be around for the foreseeable future to provide guidance – between trips to visit the kids and grandkids and the other multiple adventures he and Vickie have planned.

AFM has commissioned the Forest History Society in Durham, N.C., to interview Bo, his colleagues and associates to create a permanent record of his accomplishments and we look forward to that publication being available in the near future. So, if you want to learn about one successful way to start a consulting company, get on the Forest History Society's reading list and see what it has to say about the Shaw Method! ©