

Contents

page **26**



Features

Cover Story

16 Community service provides winning leadership

Brian Williams, Ashton Service Group, wins our first annual Community Leader Award

26 Truck safety

The new light-duty trucks are safer than ever

Facts and Ideas

8 Conflict-busting conversations

How to turn conflict into opportunity

10 Site notes

Green insulation...earthquakes...Space Age heat

Guest Column

12 Ian Szabo

Do your work, then let it go

14 Letters

Contractor U hits the spot

Departments

7 Editorial

Knowing and doing

36 Contractor University

Grow your company, Part 3

Stuff we like

40 Steve Maxwell's Construct Canada picks

42 Product file: Task, Makita, Bosch, Milwaukee

The Holdback

46 Speared by WSIB



page **8**

Cover Story

2011 Community Leader Award
Ashton Service Group

WINNING

Service

**Ashton Service Group's Brian Williams
wins *Canadian Contractor's* first
annual Community Leader Award**

Photos: Roger Mahler/Union Photographers

It seems like Brian Williams can't say no—to customers, charities or to investment in his staff at Ashton Service Group of Richmond, B.C. His record on corporate responsibility would embarrass companies ten times Ashton's size. The firm combines high levels of community service with an effective business strategy that has driven growth in tough economic times.

Williams' parents arrived in Canada from England in 1957. His father was a plumber and worked for most of his career in local shopping malls. Starting at the age of five, Williams helped his dad out whenever he could.

Money was tight when he was young, and by the age of ten, he had a paper route. By 11, he was selling ice cream from a cart. "I was always the top guy," he says. "I would start as soon as they opened the shack and work until it was dark. I just kept riding around Richmond so I always made sure I sold the most!"

At 14, Williams was working as a busboy at the Richmond Inn, eventually working his way up into room service. That was where he met his wife-to-be, Julie, and decided to find something that left his evenings free.

He joined B.C. Plumbing Supplies and decided to pursue a pre-apprenticeship in plumbing at British Columbia Institute of Technology. After completing the course, he joined Pascoe Williams as an apprentice. He worked there for the next eight years.

Early days

Eventually he found out that a maintenance contract for B.C. Housing was coming up. He bid on and got the job, which started the next Monday. "That's when Ashton Mechanical Ltd. was born," says Williams.

Going into business for himself was a gamble. Starting with \$10,000 in the bank, he bought a van and put racks and bins in it. "I was in business that day... It just took off from there," says Williams.

That was 26 years ago. "It has sort of grown by one truck a year and we are at 24 trucks now—just slow and steady growth, not getting too carried away," he says. Recently, Ashton Mechanical Ltd. became Ashton Service Group, to reflect a broader array of services.

Some customers remember Williams from those early days. "When I first met Brian, the dashboard of his van was his desk. You could see him driving around with his dashboard covered with paperwork," says Larry Sellers, building maintenance coordinator, for the City of Richmond.

"I started working with him 20 years ago. My original manager was having trouble with a specific facility. He opened up the phone book and looked under 'A,' and there was Brian's ad. He called him up, Brian fixed the problem promptly, and my boss was duly impressed. When they went out to tender,

THE CANADIAN CONTRACTOR COMMUNITY LEADER AWARD

What is it? Why have it? How can I enter next year? By Rob Koci

WHEN WE FIRST CONCEIVED of the Canadian Contractor Community Leader Award, we decided right away that we wanted an award that set the criteria beyond the business of building. It's true, community leadership requires an excellent business track record, but it also requires willingness to give back, to take an active part in addressing the needs of the community outside of business hours. That can mean volunteering time and expertise to local projects, organizations, charities or initiatives working to provide solutions to community problems. It can also mean making any kind of contribution that improves the overall quality of life in the community being served. This year's winner Brian Williams certainly met that criteria and we are happy to have him as our first Community Leader Award winner.

There are plenty of awards contests for renovators to enter, but most are connected to an association awards program, so you can't participate if you are not a member. As an independent publication that does not rely on an association mailing list for its circulation, Canadian Contractor is in the unique position of being able to invite any contractor in Canada—regardless of where he is or if he has any affiliation at all—to participate. That's what makes our award truly national.

Because our circulation is close to 30,000, we have lots of contractors to choose from. You know that when someone like Brian Williams steps up to tell his story and is ultimately chosen to receive this award, he is rising above a very large field and has proven himself an exceptional businessperson and human being.

Only one contractor could win this year, but there are years to come and we look forward to seeing your application for our Community Leader Award down the road. All Canadian renovation, custom home, home repair or home improvement contractors and their subtrades that have operated under the current ownership for at least two years are eligible. There is no fee to enter. We will seek new entries for our 2012 winner starting in the spring of next year. If you want to enter then, email the editor for an application form and instructions.



Brian won the tender, and he's been our plumbing contractor ever since," says Sellers.

Jim Allen, maintenance supervisor for Guildford Town Centre also remembers Williams from those times. "I was working for a shopping center in the Lower Mainland. I was looking for a plumber to do some work and Ashton was in one of the tenant spaces." A casual request led to a problem being fixed quickly. "I've been using Ashton ever since.



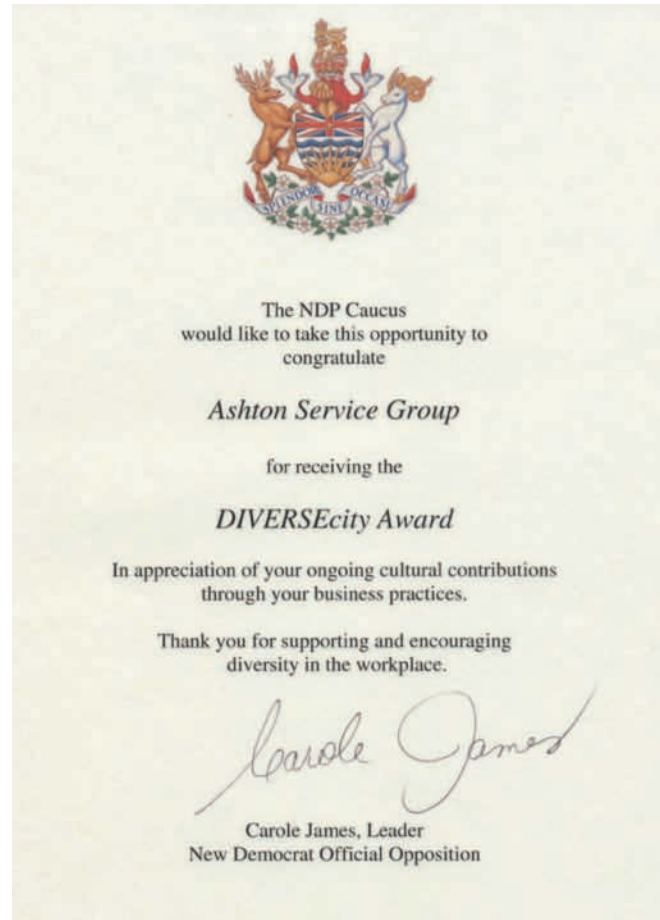
BALANCING ACT

AS THE BUSINESS HAS GROWN, Williams has been able to get away from daily operations and take more time to help others. "I have always had sort of a 'give' attitude. It's probably in the last ten years that I have had a little bit more time and resources to be able to help out more," he says.

Does his charitable activity win him any business? Williams dismisses the question. "You can't measure what you do (from a charitable point of view) in a monetary way," he says. "People have noticed us helping out, but I've never looked for that or wanted that." More exciting for him is finding other businessmen willing to cooperate in community initiatives. "We're finding a lot of people with common interests," he says.

His charitable work probably accounts for about 20 per cent of his work week in terms of phone calls, organizing and setting things up. "Some weeks, I'll take Friday off completely for that kind of stuff," he says. "I have people in place, and I want to let them shine and get out of their way.

"I'm fortunate enough to be able to help. So if I can, I will. Some people go to the bar; some people help out."



"Brian is one of the guys who started from the tools and worked his way up. He talks the talk and he walks the walk... When Brian's team is in here, I'm not babysitting them. I know Brian, I know the work ethic, they know the place and they are a very good team," says Allen. "When they're on-site doing something for me, I know it's being done, it's being done right, and it's being done safe."

Giving to the community

Williams' sincere concern for people and their problems is shown in a range of community service awards.

Recent examples include:

▲ 2010 Annual Cultural DIVERSEcity Award from the DIVERSEcity Community Resources Society, which honours diversity in the workforce.

▲ 2009 International Humanitarian Award, Quality Service Contractors, which goes to a business that exhibits a high moral standard in giving back to the community.

▲ 2008 Business of the Year (26-75 employees category) in the Richmond Chamber of Commerce Business Excellence Awards, recognizing outstanding business practices and community involvement.

RICHMOND CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

2008 BUSINESS EXCELLENCE AWARDS

Ashton Service Group Wins Business Of The Year*

31st Annual Business Excellence Awards salute Richmond's best

Wednesday, Nov 5th was a night to remember for the local business community. As 30 businesses and business leaders were recognized for their outstanding work, 12 walked away with awards. Ashton Service Group won Business of the Year (26-70 employees).

For 27 years, Brian Williams of Ashton Service Group has offered a reliable plumbing service to the community. Residential and commercial clients have trusted Ashton to keep all systems go from plumbing, heating, air conditioning, electrical, ventilation, mechanical systems, and more.

Brian and Julie also live by family and community values which encompass 'giving back' when they are able; from sponsoring kids sports to assisting local firefighters and upgrading the premises of the Union Gospel Mission drop in center.

Finalists in this category were Hayden Diamond Bit and Richmond Steel Recycling Ltd.

ASHTON SERVICE GROUP

*to 70 employee category

▲ 2005 Community Achievement Award, Quality Service Contractors.

▲ 2005 Community Achievement Award for the Semiahoo Minor Hockey Association, Surrey B.C.

Williams' support goes far beyond signing cheques and ac-

cepting plaques—his involvement is always personal.

"The thing about him is that he's always there," says Craig Jones, executive director of the Richmond Chamber of Commerce. "Depending on the group, it could be at 3:00 in the morning—he's out there." He shows integrity and leadership, Jones says. "If he's asking you to step up, he'll be stepping up there with you."

The homeless are a personal cause for Williams. "I try to go out six or eight times a year on the mobile mission after work, looking for homeless people around Vancouver," he says. Getting one homeless person who has been living on the streets into a shelter and involved in a program is a great experience for him. "You've done that, and you're driving home afterwards and the sun is coming up—I don't even care about the money," he says.

Williams' list of accomplishments seems endless. Here are a few:

He donated a van to the Union Gospel Mission in Vancouver—which he coincidentally dropped off about two hours after they had been praying for one!

WORK IN CONSTRUCTION?

GoRici.ca

the two kids I was raising," he says. "He always recognized my efforts with the kids. He was very supportive of what I was doing, in my little project. I found it beneficial to have somebody there—kind of giving me a pat on the back."

Key assets

Williams' focus on human needs includes his staff. "He's a very giving gentlemen and he works very hard. He understands that his biggest asset is his staff. He spends a lot of time making sure that they are one big family," says Jones.

"The secret is to understand the needs and wants of your people and treat them the way you would like to be treated," says Williams. He uses the model of a sports team: "If somebody is not playing right, somebody on the team will talk to them or the coach might have to talk to them—or sometimes you have to trade them, if they don't suit the culture."

What is that culture? "Ownership has a can-do attitude on everything. 'No' is not in our vocabulary," says Williams.

Besides routine technical training for the trades, Williams organizes sales and customer service training for everyone in

the company. Everyone in the organization is promoting Ashton Service Group.

The company has cast a wide net when recruiting, and has won a diversity award for its staff demographics. "We have a whole cross-section here," says Williams. He posts jobs on Service Canada's Job Bank. As well, he is often contacted by overseas employment agencies.

Williams is careful in his choices. "We usually have at least three telephone conversations with them—just to see if there's a fit and get a feel for the type of work they have been doing and get a gut feeling about them."

Employees see the company's sense of community responsibility and buy into it. "It's contagious; they want to be part of it. You'd be amazed at the staff who come up and offer us a cheque or ask to help."

Peer review

Williams is largely self-educated about business management. "I have not been near a university in my life. I have Grade 12. But I feel like I have an MBA through the training I got through my associations with my peers."

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