

Steve Klessig knows his ABCs

By David Nordby
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Steve Klessig

He has done a lot in his career, but Steve Klessig says being elected by Associated Builders and Contractors' (ABC) board of directors to serve as the 2020 national chair-elect is near the top of his accomplishments.

"I'd say it ranks right up there with high career achievements," Klessig, Keller's vice president of architecture and engineering, said.

ABC is a national construction industry trade group. Established in 1950, it currently represents 21,000 member companies. The Wisconsin chapter in Madison is the largest in the country with 887 member companies this year.

Its membership includes general contractors, trades people, sub contractors, carpenters, plumbers, electricians and other jobs of the like.

"I've been in this industry for 37 years now, and so it certainly ranks as one of the highest things I've been able to do with the help of a lot of other people," Klessig said of his work with ABC.

Lumber companies, lawyers and plumbing companies who supply products to the industry are associate members of the group.

"We always seem to be equated with the union. We're a merit-philosophy association, meaning we're not against unions," Klessig said, before pointing out that unions represent 18 percent of construction workers.

"The non-union people are a much larger group, we're just not as loud," Klessig said.

Union members can be a part of the ABC group, too, though.

Klessig was hired by Keller in 1988, and has been involved with ABC since he began work on legislative issues.

"That was the thing that I enjoyed the most – legislative advocacy," Klessig said.

By 2014, after a board member recommended it, he became chairman of the ABC Wisconsin chapter. Then someone recommended him for a national board member, which turned into being a part of the national executive committee.

If successful in the chair-elect role, Klessig would be elected by the board to be national chairman of the committee next year, following 2020 National ABC Chair Tim Keating from R.C. Stevens Construction Company in Florida.

"Maybe, I shouldn't have joined this if I wasn't willing to lead it," Klessig recalled thinking to himself as others recommended him for advanced positions.

Klessig's role in chair-elect is only the second time in the near 50-year history of the state chapter that a Wisconsin member was elected to the national post.

"It's really not self-achievement. It's hard work and then being recognized by people that are willing to help you achieve your goals," Klessig said.

Success in the chair-elect position, he says, boils down to four key

goals: worker safety, workforce development, political advocacy and increased membership.

Klessig is an advocate for less regulation on the construction industry.

"What I've been thinking about is that the construction industry has enough things that it has to battle ... rain, snow, climate change, pricing issues like tariffs and price increases, customer bases ... The one thing we don't need on top of it is more regulation. One of the things that I will work hard to do is reduce government regulation in our companies and frankly our lives," Klessig said.

He adds he's not against government, just what he refers to as "bad government."

"We have so much unnecessary regulation in our industry that one of my biggest goals will be to turn them backward or at least slow it down," Klessig said. "Bad government tends to take away our freedoms and give us regulations and we don't get anything in return for it."

Klessig pitches his case for the construction industry as part of the goal of workforce development.

"It's a great job. It pays well. It's safe. People don't think it's glamorous, but you can leave high school, get into the trades, get paid to take

an apprenticeship," Klessig says, as he lists off the steps one can take to a prosperous career in the industry.

"In many cases, make more money than a four-year college graduate," he said.

Currently, Klessig says, nearly all good contractors are looking for workers.

"We think it's a really attractive career," he said.

As a 37-year veteran of the industry, Klessig believes that he brings with him perspective.

"The experience that you get from working at any job for a long period of time is that you get to see a lot of things happen over an extended period of time," Klessig said. "By definition that gives you perspective."

He says he wants to learn something from that perspective and the history of what worked and didn't work for the industry.

"It's a very different thing than leading a construction company, but leading is leading," Klessig said of the role.

As one of his favorite quotes goes, Klessig says he will learn soon about his leadership traits.

"You can tell real quickly if you're a good leader if you have anybody following you," Klessig said.