



**DOING GOOD WORK AND
DOING GOOD**

David Gatchell

I believe that almost any industry can be disrupted for good in some way.

My chosen field and educational background is in engineering and construction. After graduating from college I worked for other firms for seven years before starting my own firm, Fellgroup, more than ten years ago. What we've been able to accomplish as a company over the past few years [has positively affected the lives of thousands of people](#). It has not been easy, but it has been worth all of the effort. My hope is that my story will encourage others to follow their passion and find the right path for their work, one that makes a difference.

From childhood I have had it drummed into me by my parents, my life experiences, and my own work: *You can do good work and you can do good*. I've learned that life is not a zero-sum game that requires that we take everything and leave nothing in order to succeed. I subscribe to the concept that through innovation and creativity we can all add to the global pool of resources. In fact, Peter Diamandis authored one of my favorite quotes in *Abundance*: "Make more pies." I strongly believe that in doing so, one can have a positive impact on the world and make a solid profit while doing so.

My goal was not to be an *entrepreneur*. In fact, when I was growing up this wasn't even a word I was aware of, much less a career path with which I was familiar. I knew what I wanted to do in the world when I set out in it, but while exploring ways to realize my dreams with other global organizations it became clear that there was a better path forward. No one I knew was doing things the way I thought they should be done; hence I stumbled into entrepreneurship!

I didn't really know what I was getting into, but I was committed and embraced the challenge. In fact, one of the biggest challenges we've faced as a company has been limited financial support. Bootstrapping the company since inception with no external financing meant that I had to wear many hats and fill roles on the sales and operations side of the business, and, well... pretty much everywhere else. Only when we had sufficient revenues was I able to hire the right people to excel at specific positions. At times I wasn't even able to pay myself! So, yes, we've had our challenges and I'm grateful that we've been able to meet all of them and grow a successful business. I'm confident that our mission is a valuable one and that makes it all worth it.

The Fellgroup Way

Fellgroup is a design-build construction contractor, specializing in US Government projects overseas. Our team conducts field investigations, prepares engineering and architectural designs, performs construction services and commissions facilities and installations. Our services represent a turn-key system for our clients. From A to Z, we deliver a project that's ready to meet our clients' operational needs upon handover. To make this possible, we have staff on two continents, consultants and third-party providers in a dozen countries, and a network of preferred vendors to work with as partners or subcontractors on a project specific basis.

Past projects include a runway repair, aircraft hangar, hospital, library, numerous schools, dormitories, and government facilities. One of our big efforts at the moment is a school construction program in West Africa, designing and building 9 schools throughout two countries. Our niche is delivering critical services under volatile conditions in the developing world and in conflict zones where operating a company and producing results can be challenging. We're proud of the fact that we repeatedly get the job done under difficult circumstances

in a variety of countries. On all of our projects, we maintain the highest safety and quality standards and we get the client what they want.

Construction companies are ever present around the world, and everywhere I've ever travelled it was possible to hire a firm to build a building, house, road, or bridge. Some of these firms are reputable, responsible, and deliver high quality products; some are not and do not. At the end of the day, laying block or pouring concrete is not a unique service. We deliver the same physical work as countless other firms do, but the difference is that we do so with the end impact in mind. Our goal is to have the greatest positive impact on the community where we work. We do so by ensuring that the work we do is well integrated with the local community so that the overall project is sustainable with long lasting positive effects. When we finish the job and demobilize from the project site we leave behind more than just brick and mortar.

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We have been asked if our chosen methods make the job more difficult. My answer? Yes—and no. We hire and train locals to do the work, under the direct supervision of our international management team. This builds capacity in our communities, leaving behind new skills and resources that can be used again in the future. So that's a good thing.

It's certainly challenging from the human resource side of things, because we hire people locally, train them, and make sure we are all on the same page regarding quality, safety standards, and production timelines. However, experience has shown that going that route for international design-build construction projects is the most cost effective way to meet our obligations. If we were to hire a team of carpenters and masons here in Texas, put them all on a flight, and then send over a couple of 40 foot containers with materials and equipment to the middle of central Africa, we could do the job. Other companies operate this way. However, in our model this would add a lot of additional costs for materials, foreign labor, etc. above what we would spend locally. At the end of the job it would have cost significantly more for us as a contractor, a greater cost that we would have to pass on to our client. Further, projects performed this way are not sustainable and have limited long term benefit to the community where services are delivered.

Our way begins and ends with a simple and attainable idea: involve the local community during project planning and execution to ensure we leave sustainable value behind. We've learned that even the best projects can fail if not integrated with the local environment and community. We involve and include all of the different stakeholders in the process, and we're very relationship focused. We aim to hire as many local people and buy as many local materials as possible. This approach invests as much of the project revenue locally as possible, supporting local industries and individuals and thereby having more of an impact on the greater communities.

Many companies who do similar work mobilize with labor and materials from their home country, in effect reducing the potential financial impact in the local environment while minimizing the buy-in from community stakeholders. In these cases, the only benefit to the

local community is the physical product. We have found from experience that if that same project was implemented in a way that incorporates local participants, the community becomes more invested in project success and the long term benefits are greatly improved. If we can exceed the expectations of our clients while offering sustainable value in the regions where we work, all at a lower cost than that of competitors using an alternate approach, everybody wins.

We want transparency built into every project where the client knows everything that's going on in real time. Fellgroup has even developed our own proprietary software application to accomplish that. This software provides verifiable data from all of our project sites on a daily basis and we and our clients know what's happening all the time. Our company has about a dozen different sites in 7 or 8 countries, all in Africa, and with this software we are able to see what's happening today on each of these sites. As we grow and scale, this kind of transparency and connectedness will become even more important.

Our brand promise is simple: We're committed to successfully deliver projects under any conditions, with full transparency to all stakeholders. Certainly we face challenges, as the kind of work we do is not simple or easy. And, yes, things happen on our projects that don't typically happen in developed countries. We've navigated labor shortages, civil unrest, a coup d'état, sandstorms, monsoons, and insecurity—to name just a few challenges that we have overcome.

We have taken a very straightforward business and business model, with a history of doing things one way, and disrupted it by taking it apart and putting it back together to do more. So, what business are you in? Can it be done in a different way so that it has more long-term impact? Are you supposed to lead that effort? If you are, stay encouraged. Stay focused. Stay open to new ideas and be creative. The end game is what matters. How you got there and how long it took to arrive are, at the end of the day, just details.

Hiring a Team

When I first started Fellgroup, I was all by myself and had to do it all. I did project scheduling for construction projects, budgeting and cost control, engineering design review, accounting with an Excel spreadsheet, as well as business development and marketing. On a practical level I now have people who are much better at their respective roles than I would ever be. I have learned that I shouldn't be the smartest guy in the room in my own organization; therefore, I aim to find and hire people who are smarter and better than me at these roles, and who have their own skills and talents and ideas.

The hiring process is relatively simple for me. First, I identify a candidate with similar values to Fellgroup's Core Values and evaluate if they're a good cultural fit for our organization. Second I look for the necessary background and skill-set. If/when I find a great cultural fit, I'm open to training up to the necessary skill level; however, the opposite is not true. I find that culture is hard to train and not typically worth the effort, especially when there are many candidates who would be a great fit from the beginning. We just need to find them! Once we select the right person to bring on-board I let them run and do what they are great at. This allows me to use my unique ability, setting the vision and culture, engaging in key relationships, ensuring the company is healthy and supporting everyone as best I can in *their* pursuits.

I want to spend my time growing a company that's going to change the world. The people who assume their individual roles make that possible. The inverse of that? It's impossible at some point to do what one wants to do without a team. Even if one controls every aspect of one's business, success will require getting good help. Trying to do it alone is a fool's game.

Where is your team? Are you scanning the horizon to find likeminded people to help you with your mission?

Driving Impact and Profit

Early on in my career I was fortunate to work with international NGOs and the United Nations. I have long supported their missions and values they collectively hold as organizations. However, in my experience, some such organizations are less than efficient in execution. On the other side of the coin, the business community, focuses solely on profits, often sacrifices the greater good to drive the bottom line. My goal is to build an organization that shares the humanitarian focus of the NGO/UN world, combined with the accountability and efficiency of a business.

I think we've had some degree of success so far in doing that. We are trying to run a really tight ship and drive profitability, while executing efficiently to get the work done with profit remaining. But at the same time we have a vision to impact a billion people's lives. That vision is obviously more in sync with the humanitarian sector. At the end of the day, we're trying to do good work, not just trying to make a buck at any cost. We invest in the people with whom we work and have a sustainable project delivery system in order to take us towards our goal.

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And, if the numbers are right, there is plenty of work to be done around the world and plenty of positive and much needed impact to produce. Over 70 percent of the world's population lives on less than 10 dollars a day. Half of the world lives on less than \$2.50 a day. I believe that we can do a better and more effective job of doing the work of the UN and the US government than other organizations who are more top heavy and carry high overhead. We can have the impact that we want to have and be profitable. It's not either/or. It's both/and.

I feel fortunate to be in this position, building a company with values I hold dear and growing that business into an entity where we can have our thumbprints on projects all over the world. When we show up, people will know that we are going to do good work and finish what we start, and leave lasting value in those communities. We want exponential growth and exponential impact.

So, what's your mission? 📌



Info

About the author

David Gatchell is an accomplished professional with more than fifteen years experience working to engineer positive social changes worldwide through project management, engineering and entrepreneurship. As founder and president of Fellgroup, David is responsible for the overall management of operations including business development, project management and client relations. David brings a wealth of experience across a broad-range of disciplines, among them: engineering, construction, international development, humanitarian response, leadership, capacity building, and impact measurement. In this role he aims to achieve a positive global impact, thereby improving the lives of millions of people throughout the world.

Prior to establishing Fellgroup, David served in multiple management roles for international organizations and global contractors delivering engineering and construction services to governmental clients in Central Asia, Middle East and Eastern Europe. He started his career as a structural engineer for a leading design firm in Los Angeles.

He has been privileged to serve on the board of the Austin chapter of Entrepreneurs' Organization (EO) where he won the 2015 Global award for Membership Integration Excellence and in 2016 launched a Global Student Entrepreneur Awards (GSEA) program in Central Texas.

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