

Edited from Art of Fairness, Chapter Three - Builders.

The chapter focuses on Paul Starrett, the Kansas-born New York contractor who created the Empire State Building. Through his life he suffered from bouts of depression: a feeling he described of being 'lost and unhappy – detached from the activities that satisfy me'. But it meant a great deal to him that those who were powerless were treated fairly. However gruff he appeared on the outside, that was the one thing he could hold on to. For the duration of the Empire State project it helped keep his inner darkness from getting worse.

What he accomplished was extraordinary. Thirteen months wasn't simply how long it took to get the main steel frame of what was then the world's tallest skyscraper built. It was everything: from disassembling the massive Waldorf-Astoria hotel that had been on the site already – and taking away the thousands of truckloads of rubble that produced – to designing, constructing, then topping out the new building, its windows and flooring all complete, to its full soaring height.

His twist was generosity - but of a highly sensible sort:

....If Starrett had been naively generous to everyone he would have failed. But he had survived years in New York construction, a life-experience which disabuses anyone of belief in the inherent benevolence of mankind. If the principles he applied as work on the project began were to be summarized in a Buddhist-style koan, it would be a blunt 'Give, but audit.'

Building sites are magnificent locales for scams. A foreman, for example, might invoice for 100 workers but only supply 94. Workers will nonchalantly borrow tools which they are never going to bring back. And suppliers across New York had become expert in skimping on the quality of bricks, of bolts, of glass and of virtually every other component known to man, as the original procurement documents for the Empire State's construction reveal.

Since he'd need help to block all the tricks once construction began, Starrett brought in a Canadian engineer named John Bowser. In his heart Bowser was a romantic who appreciated the grandeur in architecture. He even dreamed of having a miniature Empire State Building in limestone for his tombstone one distant day. But Bowser also had left home at age 11, worked construction around the world, and knew every possible subterfuge. Notes from the time describe him as having 'the qualities of tact and infinite patience', combined with, as archivists delicately put it, a 'forceful personality'.

That's the mix you need to make generosity work in a complex new project. To ensure the unions stayed honest about how many men were there, Bowser hired staff to physically visit each man on the construction site: twice in the morning,

and twice in the afternoon. Many of the workers spent their day on beams dangling up to 1,000 feet above the ground so that was not an easy job. But as Bowser's records coolly note: 'This method takes away from the foreman . . . the temptation of favoring [nonexistent] accounts.'



A worker on the Empire State Building under construction, 1931

To keep inventory from walking away, Bowser created a department of accountants who'd also clamber through the building to check that equipment was remaining where it was supposed to be. All this was a Borgesian task, given that there were no computers, and all directives had to be written by hand, then typed, filed and cross-filed; also given that the inventory being sought was constantly scooting around on monorails, trolley cars, and steam engines.

[[I explain that Starrett was paying double the wages of most other sites; that he ensured good quality subsidized restaurants on site as the building went up; that he provided full pay when it was too windy to work, and much else.]]

His lack of naivety in those generous offerings was crucial. Starrett knew that he could only continue being fair to the workers by auditing thoroughly enough to ensure they were just as fair in return; giving the work that was their side of the bargain. Yet he also was decent about it, having Bowser block potential cons without humiliating the workers.

He also followed through on his promises. The subsidized restaurants duly appeared, scattered among the building's floors as the construction rose. The crews used them to take away hot sauerkraut, stews, soft drinks and 'near beer' (Prohibition making alcohol illegal) for lunches on their work sites, which

sometimes – as a great photograph showed – took place on exposed beams, far above the Manhattan streets.

As a result, creativity poured out, just as at Boyle's Olympic site generations later. Workers suggested building a miniature railway line to transport bricks into the site, instead of, as was usual before, stacking them on wheelbarrows to be more laboriously pushed along wobbling wooden gangplanks. With a peak of 100,000 bricks arriving in every eight-hour shift, that sped up construction a lot. Electricians spontaneously came up with wired signaling systems to replace the usual bell ropes for announcing when a shipment was coming up.

Other ideas had consequences still visible on the Empire State Building today. Expert craftsmen were traditionally called in to smooth the edges of the large stones that served as such a large structure's facing material. But others quickly pointed out that it would save time to take stones still rough from the quarries, and simply cover their joints with thin metal panels bolted deep into the stone. Junior architects perfected that, and the famous Art Deco front for the building was the result, with its shining stainless-steel strips leaping out from their grey limestone surround.

Starrett and Bowser were getting back a lot more than they gave out, but that's the magic of gratitude. Since the project's multitude of subcontractors found that they too could depend on what each other said, a powerful form of fast-tracking started up: one of the first for a construction project of this size. Foundries knew they'd been given the honest date by which they'd need to have the first steel beams ready. Likewise suppliers of elevator cables, and producers of the cement needed for floor pouring, and structural engineers and mechanical engineers and hundreds of other participants could trust what they were being asked to do.

Starrett was also spared the usual high turnover on such construction sites, with all the retraining costs that would have entailed. Workers didn't want to quit their jobs, not with these wages and attitudes.

Starrett still rarely smiled, and grumpily snapped out his decisions. But that didn't matter. You don't have to love someone to respect them. You don't even have to like them. If they're fair, and you see their competence, that's enough.

When ironworkers on comparable buildings to the Empire State across the river in New Jersey, earning far less, went on strike, Starrett's workers felt no reason to join them. He and his brothers ended up among the leading contractors in the country.

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There's an insight to all this from the ancient sage Hillel, writing two thousand years ago. What he asked, in essence were two linked questions: 'If I am not for myself, who is for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I?'

The idea is that neither extreme will do. You need to stand up for yourself: otherwise, in a rough world, you will be destroyed. But if that's all you do – if you're only for yourself – what kind of person are you? The Starretts were opting for a middle path, and had the savvy to know that guarding against cheats – what came out as 'Give, but audit' in a brief koan summary – was critical.

This applies more widely than just to skyscrapers of the last century...*[[and then I go on to current examples]]*