



Great Lakes Roofing Corp.

Chris Lampien, president of Great Lakes Roofing, discusses a culture of purpose with the company he loved enough to buy from its founder

By Bryan Gottlieb



► Chris Lampien, president and principal of Great Lakes Roofing, made a career pivot after the Great Recession forced his hand in the late aughts. His predecessor hired him in 2012; he purchased the company in 2021.

When the carnival-like atmosphere of the Republican National Convention descended on Milwaukee last July, the novelty appealed to Chris Lampien, principal of Great Lakes Roofing, who considered heading downtown to experience the hubbub firsthand.

And why not? A major political party rarely comes to your proverbial backyard for its quadrennial nominating event. Still, judgment overruled curiosity in the end, offering insight into the 46-year-old Wisconsin native.

“Part of me wanted to go down there and see what it was all about,” he says, acknowledging the gridlock that invariably comes with a high-profile event, “but the logical part of me took over and said, ‘Don’t do it, it’ll ruin your day’; it was very busy around town.”

The man knows himself. Another thing to know about Lampien is that he’s quick to learn and quick to apply those lessons. That insight is evidenced by the fact that, within nine years of being hired by Great Lakes’ founder, he purchased the company he now oversees.

Some call it grit, others say determination. However you characterize it, Lampien’s ascent to company president in 2021 was born of equal parts experience, resilience and timing. That last point is relevant as Lampien didn’t set out to have a career in commercial roofing. Following technical school, Lampien started his profession as a residential home builder. And there, he found success — until intervening circumstances forced his hand.

Pivot and Reset

It was the late aughts — the Great Recession — when residential home contractors were as in demand as polio.

Lampien found himself in a situation that eventually sidelined large sectors of the economy for years. But, with mouths to feed, he hustled, picking up various multi-unit projects that led him into commercial construction. The change from residential to commercial eventually brought him to an interview with the founder of Great Lakes, where he was hired as a salesman.

“I had some experience working with some general [commercial] contractors and thought there might be an opportunity there, but what I really liked about Great Lakes ... wasn’t just the roofing part of it [as much as] ... here’s a growing company with what looked like opportunities for me,” he explains.

“I saw I had to cut my teeth and learn the sales side of the business,” Lampien says. “When I came in and interviewed, and talked to the [then]-president and saw the vision was to grow and expand, I thought, if I’d like to have a place that I can be at for a long time, it seems like this one has quite a good opportunity for me.”

Founded in 1983 by Don Puccetti and Mark Bartolutti, Great Lakes Roofing specializes in commercial reroofing, repair and maintenance. The company has approximately 100 full-time employees, is non-union, and has four locations, including its Germantown headquarters, Madison, Appleton and Milwaukee.

Great Lakes leaned into commercial roofing within the first decade of operating because, as Lampien says, the owners saw a dearth in the customer service aspect of commercial roofing. The company started and remains principally focused on reroofs, repairs and maintenance; new construction is negligible, which Lampien pegs at just 5%.

In 2007, *Roofing Contractor* magazine named Great Lakes its Commercial Roofing Contractor of the Year. By then, its focus on safety, corporate culture and customer service had been well-established.

“Great Lakes Roofing Corporation should be considered one of the best contractors because of its commitment to taking care of the customer: both internal (employees) and external (building owners),” Mark Bartolutti, then-vice president of Great Lakes Roofing Corp., said in an October 2007 RC profile. “The commitment to our employees has been shown through our continuously improving safety program.”

Onboarding at Great Lakes, Lampien set out to understand how best to provide service to clients that remained on point while working within his customers’ budgets. He attributes his success in those first several years to an “outsider’s perspective” as a non-roofer who thought outside the box.

Five years into his tenure, he made overtures to Puccetti about taking on greater responsibilities for a move into management. At that point, the company had been in business for 35 years, and Puccetti had begun considering his exit strategy.

Without an heir-apparent, Lampien filled the vacuum and began focusing on the myriad elements of running the business, growing its customer base and preparing to accept the reins. Three more years would pass before the founder passed the baton.

Last year, Great Lakes celebrated its 40th year in business. During our conversation, Lampien mentioned that the company is expanding its footprint in Wisconsin by building a second Milwaukee facility and preparing to enter the Iowa market next month with its first out-of-state branch in Cedar Rapids.

Creative Execution, Cultural Evolution

Stressing the communication element of the company's customer-centric approach, Lampien, like many of his contemporaries, takes pride in the collaborative effort that keeps clients happy — which, he says, requires transparency and working through roadblocks.

That approach is no less important when applied to the corporate culture Lampien has infused within Great Lakes. The elements of that culture, which he says are the company's "four pillars," each provide ballast that keeps the pipeline of work steady and the employees engaged as if each were stakeholders.

"For us, safety is a byproduct of our culture," he says. "What we do is a dangerous job, and it's really important for us to make sure that we're focusing on safety. We want all of our employees to go home [at the end of the] day ... every person who works at Great Lakes Roofing is a safety director."

While the focus on safety seems self-evident, Lampien stresses that safety is no more or less important than the other pillars encompassing what he describes as a "culture of intent," including the employee experience, customer service and quality of craftsmanship.

"[T]hose four things [work] together ... no one is more important than the other," he says. "So, safety is definitely a big part of what we do, but it's also a byproduct of a good culture, having the right equipment, the right people taking care of the customers and [operating within our] safety standards.

"[W]e made a real emphasis on understanding what the true culture and the company is and building what I call an 'intentional culture,'" he continues. "It [starts] with bringing in the correct people, having the right teammates here, and making sure everybody knows clearly what's expected of them."

In terms of creativity, Lampien describes working with one client who was facing significant repair needs but needed to, as the axiom goes, eat that elephant one bite at a time, which is always sage advice when tackling jobs that otherwise seem overwhelming.

The warehouse, a cold storage facility, had several different roof systems tied into each other because of piecemeal expansion. The seams between each roof component had begun to fail, allowing water to penetrate the roof.

Lampien explained how replacing the entire system at once would have been cost-prohibitive for the client. He added that every contractor this client met previously suggested one option: a total reroof. Lampien said he and the building owner workshopped a solution within the owner's budget.

"[T]he cost of replacement with the amount of insulation needed was just so outrageous," he explains, adding that each previous contractor



➤ One of the unique challenges Lampien faced was helping the owner of a refrigerated warehouse with multiple roof systems staunch leaks in section seams due to years of piecemeal facility expansion. The cost of a one-time reroof would have been cost-prohibitive.

consulted told the client he had no choice but to replace the entire roof.

"What I did — again, this goes back to my experience in construction, understanding how the building came together — instead of replacing the entire roof at once, [we installed] these critical patches around the whole roof, over the top of all those expansion joints, and ... was able to seal up everything ... to the point where the roof leaks stopped.

"Once we have solved that immediate pain point ... then they could just bite off one section at a time until the whole thing was [replaced]," he said.

"We were able to customize a solution," he added, noting that finding the pain points, working out solutions and involving customers throughout the process goes hand-in-glove with customer service. "Instead of going out there and saying you have to replace [everything], let's find the solution that works for you."

Pride of Participation

The roofing industry has garnered a well-earned reputation for good works projects, mainly through organizations like the Roofing Alliance, the philanthropic arm of the National Roofing Contractors Association, of which Great Lakes Roofing is a member.

As a Roofing Alliance member, Great Lakes undertook not just the underwriting and execution of roof replacements for two Ronald McDonald House facilities — Ronald McDonald House Charities is the Roofing Alliance's principal charity of choice — but, as Lampien shares, Great Lakes went beyond what was called for during its most recent effort when one of the RMHC homes ran into a "paperwork" snafu.

"We not only [took care of the paperwork issues], we also went out and held a big food drive and cooked meals and also cleaned up the entire house, so we spent a bunch of time doing non-roofing things as well," he says.

Additionally, the company has a long-running program called "Helping Hands," which predates Lampien's leadership ascension. It is a community-based program designed to help people with a roofing issue without the means to fix it.

"Sometimes, it's a matter of somebody down in their luck who needs a roof replacement, and we're able to work through the process of providing that for them," Lampien says. "Or maybe it's a larger project that they're not able to get the full funding for."

The help offered can go beyond just roofing needs. Lampien details that, depending on the circumstance, his company may invest in part of the business rather than just handing out grants.

"Last year, we partnered with a veteran program [that] absolutely needed some roof work done, but they got caught up in a little bit of paperwork or whatever, and we ended up doing a couple of repairs for them, but we came to find out that the whole [facility] needed to be cleaned out, so we decided to take a day and ... help [them] out," he says.

On that particular day, there was no roofing, per se, other than odds and ends. Instead, the muscle was supplied to power wash buildings, rake, move dirt around and remove tree stumps.

"We were doing what needed to be done for this community organization," he says. "[W]e have the ability and the knowledge to help out in the roofing community, but we also have a lot of people that are really willing to help our [broader] community as well."

Reflecting on his relatively short time leading Great Lakes, Lampien returned to the four pillars undergirding the company and each pillar's interconnectivity in supporting the other.

"So consider them at different corners of a box, right? And you have your employee experience, quality, safety, and customer service," he says. "Each one of those corners [is the parameter], and our focus is to be in the bullseye, right in the middle; ... in any of the decisions that we make and anything we [do] moving forward ... we have to make that decision while staying within that box ... because no one person is more important than the next. We're all in this together.

"We've learned that staying within that bullseye — the center of that box — keeps us in good shape." **RC**

Bryan Gottlieb is managing editor of Roofing Contractor. Reach him at 248-786-1591 or gottliebb@bnpmedia.com.