Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.
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Possessing a skill for a trade does not necessarily mean that a person has a skill for business. And while there are many skilled African-American contractors and laborers, far too many who set out in business for themselves fail to remain in business for long due to the lack of business skills. But a Twin Cities company is hoping to equip these budding entrepreneurs with the tools to run thriving, successful businesses.

ProBid, founded by Errol Foster and Dale White, has been teaching business acumen to minority, women and disadvantaged contractors since 2007. Along the way, ProBid has received contracts with MnDOT, the city of St. Paul and other agencies to assist in training and qualifying what are considered disadvantaged businesses for government contracts.

“We found we have a large number of small businesses that don’t know how to bid on a contract,” said White. “So we help them to know costs, various bidding rules and other critical information so they can be successful in the bid process. In trade schools and even in college, they don’t teach you how to run a business.”

“They know how to do the trade. They know how to lay concrete; they know how to do the jobs, but they don’t know the business – they don’t have the business acumen. Once we’ve trained people to understand the numbers, they can’t be taken advantage of,” said Foster, who has a degree in engineering. “We increased minority contracting within MnDOT by 30 percent.”

White, who has a degree in computer science, has developed proprietary software to assist contractors in every aspect of their business. The software can take blueprints and quickly provide exact square footage for a room or area, and most importantly – from a business standpoint – assist in accounting (labor, taxes, insurance, worker’s compensation, material costs, etc.) to insure a contractor can bid a job knowing his or her profit margin.

“Some people were bidding jobs and by the time they got into the project, they were over budget because they didn’t properly account for everything that went into the job,” said White.

Foster and White said another obstacle facing small minority- and women-owned contractors is the lack of up-front financing. ProBid offers a 12-hour course that once completed, participants

become pre-qualified for a line of credit. The funding comes from various sources, including non-for-profits. Up-front funding is essential when obtaining a government contract, as most such contracts do not pay in advance.

Typically, ProBid offers classes to participants for $90. The classes are valued at $1,500, but the additional cost is offset by various government agencies and non-profits. The classes run in eight-week sessions from 5 p.m. – 8 p.m. Thus far, according to Foster, ProBid has assisted more than 750 Minnesota contractors.

“We’re trying to change the mindset of a small business contractor,” said Foster.

Foster, who is a military veteran, said his company is also seeking to offer specialized courses for contractor who are also veterans. He said these courses will be at no charge to the veterans.

Skilled contracting can also provide an excellent opportunity for ex-felons. White said one ex-felon who took a ProBid course has secured a cleaning contract with several Walgreen’s and Family Dollar stores.

“You don’t need security clearance to paint stripes on a roadway,” said Foster.

For a company that is making such a name for itself, one might expect to see Foster and White in some swanky office with a fancy zip code, but that is far from the case. The duo works out of a shared space in the offices of the Minneapolis Builders Exchange (MBEX), 1123 Glenwood Ave. The exchange is a member-oriented, non-profit association dedicated to assisting construction industry businesses throughout the upper Midwest.

“This place here is a diamond in the rough,” said Foster. “Anything a contractor needs, they can get it here. This facility is a great teaching facility.”

To learn more about ProBid or to enquire about course enrollment, call (651) 967-9395 or visit www.probidtraining.com.