

Keith Tillage

The “aha” moment

When Keith Tillage worked for a major consulting firm in Dallas, he had a mentor, a black man who was 10 years his senior. Tillage watched as the man worked long hours, only to be repeatedly passed over for promotions. The mentor, who assured Tillage that his hard work would pay off, eventually made partner. Six months later, however, he was diagnosed with colon cancer, and six months after that he was dead. Tillage had always wanted to be an entrepreneur, and his friend's death made him realize the time was now. Tillage's father, Ken, already owned a residential contracting business in Baton Rouge. Tillage called his father and said, “If we go commercial, I'll come home and we'll build the business together.” Ken said yes, and in 2000 the new company was born.

R&D

The federal government typically requires 30% of its contractors to be woman- or minority-owned, Tillage says, and he felt there was an opening for a minority commercial contractor in Baton Rouge who could go after government work. A profile of a female contractor in an in-flight magazine spurred the idea. Tillage reached out to successful local contractors, including CSRS and Cajun Industries, for work and guidance. Through advice and hard experience during

the early, lean years, he learned the importance of slow growth, taking on jobs he knew he could handle and delivering what he said he would deliver.

Hitting the market

After Hurricane Katrina, companies pursuing recovery work called Tillage Construction in hopes of finding a local partner. They weren't really looking for a true partner, however; they wanted a minority front man. Tillage insisted on being deeply involved in any project so that his company could grow and be better prepared for the next job. Instead of pursuing work in New Orleans, Tillage went to Stoneville, Miss., to visit a U.S. Department of Agriculture contracting officer with whom he previously had worked. After the brief meeting, Tillage struck up a conversation with another man in the restroom; he turned out to be a top regional USDA official. The chance meeting led to a \$500,000 contract, Tillage's largest job up to that point.

Tillage says:

“We manage expectations. If I think it's going to be done in three days, I'm going to tell you three days or four. I'm not going to tell you two. What people want is professionalism. They want to know that they can believe what you tell them.”

Text by David Jacobs • Photography by Brian Baiamonte

POSITION: Co-owner

COMPANY: Tillage Construction

WHAT THEY DO: General contractor,
mostly public-sector work

REVENUE: \$7.7 million in 2010;
projected \$19 million to \$21 million in 2011

NEXT GOAL: Acquire private-sector work
and expand into Texas and Florida



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