After successfully managing the delivery of several complicated projects in the Middle East, Imad Ghantous, Senior Vice President of Hill International, talks about Hill’s endeavours in thought leadership in the construction industry. So how important is this objective?

by Tamim Al Hakim
In an exclusive interview with Arabian Business, Imad Ghantous, Senior Vice President of Hill International, emphasizes his firm’s goal to become a thought leader in the construction industry by having delivered some of the most complicated and challenging projects in the Middle East and North Africa. Thought Leadership is an important topic that is, perhaps, not given its fair share of recognition in our industry. It is about reaching a plateau of knowledge that makes your firm become the go-to authority for information, technology and expertise related to a specific field in our industry. It is about possessing an inherent ability to contribute positively to the advancement of the Science of Project Management and also having the ability to speculate on what the market needs will be tomorrow.

Recognizing trends before they actually occur and applying that insight to improve the outcome is the hallmark of thought leadership.

Being on the cutting edge of technology and utilizing state of the art systems and processes in itself is not sufficient to become a thought leader. It is the added ability to influence and inspire your peers to implement them. Constantly learning from an evolving industry is critical to ensure that thought leadership is always forward looking. Attaining such a status is not granted but earned through the successful delivery of projects that are challenging, critical to our clients, and to the development of the country they are in. Over the years Hill has contributed positively to its clients, the industry, and the countries it operates in.

To be more technical, how and when did thought leadership start for you?

Thought leadership is a constantly evolving status. It really has to do with the industry as a whole. Getting to a point in your profession where you have executed and delivered successfully many projects and along the way contributing positively to the scientific and practical aspects of the industry, transforms you to become the go-to entity when difficult projects or complex projects come along.

The Palm in Dubai, the award winning Muscat Airport, the Bahrain Airport, the Abu Dhabi Airport, and King Abdullah Financial District in Saudi Arabia, all are large complex projects Hill has delivered successfully and we continue to do so. This is partly why we have become the go-to project management firm; it is about trust and credibility.

Can we talk about how did you reach this level?

Frankly, there are no specific metrics or threshold that trigger when you become a thought leader. Thought leadership is built over many years as people start gaining trust in your work and hence you begin to grow your credibility and your brand in the industry.

4.4. billion dollars was the construction value of Muscat Airport that Hill participated in its development.

This is how you become a thought leader, by contributing positively to the industry, looking at topics that are important to the industry and becoming a thought leader within those topics, contributing positively either through technical papers or seminars etc. and in various ways that you can help mentor the thought process. It is not only about mentoring individuals but also mentoring and becoming custodians of new ideas and new thoughts, and implementing technology in its support. Really, it is about listening to what the market is telling you and then responding to the market positively with solutions not just theory. It is better to have deep knowledge in certain topics in our industry rather than spray across too many associated topics.

At Hill, we specialize in project management within our industry with a long track record of successfully delivering challenging projects.

We are thought leaders in our field.

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<th>What is the benefit and gain from becoming the thought leader?</th>
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<td>Becoming a thought leader and attaining this status within the industry has several benefits, commercial and fulfills our social responsibility to the industry and to society in general.</td>
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30 years plus of experience. Hill International on boards in the Middle East.
"We are currently working on the Riyadh Metro in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia that will commence operations soon. We have also participated in the King Abdullah Financial District in Riyadh.”

Commercially, there is obviously a benefit when you become a thought leader as you impose your status within the industry and you gain wallet share. However, the other aspect, which in our minds is also very important, is our contribution to the industry. It is not always about taking, it is also about giving back. This is what we do. We give back to the industry, knowledge, experience, and leadership in our profession.

We particularly look at risks, and we try as much as we can to foresee risks and mitigate them before they impact the client’s projects. The whole science of risk is a complicated one. We try as much as we possibly can to simplify that and try to find methods and tools that allow for practical solutions.

Do you want to give examples on this particular topic of thought leadership?

The fact that clients want us to become the custodians of those transformational projects is indicative of our status in the market. There is nothing bigger than a certificate on the wall that says yes people believe in you, that’s why they are inviting you.

They believe that you are knowledgeable, that you are a thought leader in what you do, and they trust handing over their project to you. When the stakes are high and failure is not an option, you would see Hill in the lead.

How would you differentiate Hill from another company in the industry?

Our credibility within the industry combines several ingredients: knowledge, experience, humility, honesty, leadership, and an insatiable quest to become the go to leaders in the industry. Vanity is not in our vocabulary because once you believe you are the best that is a sure way to complacency.

We let our practice speak for itself. Several of our competitors have project management as a bolt on to a basic design consultancy. We specialize in project management and that is why we have become thought leaders in Project Management. Does that differentiate us? Of course it does.

In addition, we pride ourselves on the ability to protect our clients, from the adverse effect of risk to their projects. Potential interaction with uncertainty could certainly be detrimental to a project’s success. Our ability to work with our clients to mitigate the impact of these problems is what differentiates us in the industry.

Isn’t that what project management is?

That is part of what project management is. A part of the profession we particularly excel in. Nobody likes surprises. Our ability to foresee risks and thought leaders in Project Management. Does that differentiate us? Of course it does.

How would you differentiate people from one company from another company?

I don’t think I would stand out as the thought leader.

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