

TOP WORKPLACES

Leadership: RECON President Rob Hobbs on leading a company through tough times



Rob Hobbs, president of RECON, a small business environmental consulting firm, at the company's office in Mission Valley. (Alejandro Tamayo/The San Diego Union-Tribune)

He met with the entire staff on that first day and said, “This is the vision. This is what I think we can do. Stick with me if you can and I will do my best to get us through this.”

BY ROB NIKOLEWSKI
NOV. 19, 2023 5 AM PT

In 2019, local environmental consulting firm [RECON](#) teetered on the brink of closing.

Its chairman of the board and former owner cleaned house and approached the company’s habitat restoration team leader [Rob Hobbs](#) with a proposition: Would Hobbs take over as RECON’s president and help try to turn the company around?

RECON had “no money, millions in debt,” Hobbs said, but he took the job. Despite the fiscal hurdles and the unexpected challenge every business encountered with the onset of the pandemic in 2020, RECON is now on stable financial footing.

The company based in Mission Valley employs 79 workers in San Diego County. The 46-year-old Hobbs, who is being recognized for his leadership in the Top Workplaces small-company category, married with two children, talked to the Union-Tribune about what’s happened in the past four years.

This interview has been condensed for space and clarity.

Why did you take the job as president?

I knew it would be a lot of work and stress but I started here 14 years ago and I loved the place. I knew there would be a lot of tough decisions but I came up with a vision. Similar to environmental restoration, I can see what something is going to look like before it even starts. So I met with the entire staff on that first day and said, “This is the vision. This is what I think we can do. Stick with me if you can and I will do my best to get us through this.” And that was kind of the rallying point for people.

What was your vision for the company?

That we’re not going to go outside of our wheelhouse. We are going to be the best at what we do — a small, expert company, not keep trying to grow for the sake of growth.

You said you’re a morale booster. Why is morale so important?

Morale is everything. Morale is what makes people want to work here. It is what makes people want to be part of this vision and what we’re trying to do. If I see somebody and know they’re stressed out, I’ll have a chat with them. The president’s door is always open. And we’ll work through the problem and then that boosts their morale. They don’t want to leave here. They know that they’re supported.

When trying to turn the company around, you’ve got to make tough decisions. How did you approach it?

We had too many people in certain positions because nobody had made tough decisions. I had been here 10 years (before being named president) so I knew there were just too many people or things weren’t working well. Being billable, billing their job, not doing work for free. That was a problem — a lot of free work. We called it “scope creep.”

How long did it take for you to get to the point where you felt that things were going to work out?

It was scary because I wasn’t sure if we could even afford the lease. We moved in here (to RECON’s Mission Valley offices) in 2020, right in the middle of COVID. By our next fiscal year in June 2021 I felt, “OK, we’re heading in the right direction. We have some money in the bank, debt’s going down.” But I was still stressed. Then maybe by the next year, I felt good. It was a quick turnaround. We don’t have a big, bloated management group. We have division leads and project managers that kind of run everything but sometimes we just sit back and go, wow, this is kind of crazy how it turned around.



Rob Nikolewski