

BY IAN SCHWANDT

Building a Worker-Centered Crew

Part 4: The Tools

In the previous three articles in this series, I discussed how a lead carpenter can work from within the triangle (composed of clients, employer, and crew) of obligation and influence to produce the foundation, framework, and rough-in necessary to build a worker-centered crew. Here in the final article, I will focus on the tools that we as lead carpenters need in order to fulfill our obligations to the labor force, the client, and the company over our working days. While we can physically grasp tools of our trade such as saws, fasteners, and personal protective equipment, the tools I reference here are more abstract; however, like physical tools, they still function as essential means to get the job done.

CLEAR GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

A lead carpenter's weekly time in the field with the crew is limited—not just by the work he or she is expected to complete in a

40-hour week but by pressures imposed by clients and the employer. Many of us put in extra time when we can to increase our workday efficiency; picking up materials, reviewing drawings, or doing paperwork outside of the workweek is common in our industry. But there are many tasks that can be done only in the field, especially when it comes to training young workers.

“You can figure that out in the field” is an answer that many a lead carpenter has received after asking for clarification of a design or scope of work. Sure, we can “figure it out in the field,” but doing so comes with a cost that can throw our triangle of obligations out of balance. Every hour a lead carpenter spends doing on-site design work or managing the unrealistic expectations of a client is an hour not spent in production where the crew members can be trained. Clear project goals and objectives—provided by sales, design, and estimating professionals—are crucial tools that enable a lead carpenter not only to run the job in a profitable manner but also to teach skills, basic and advanced, to the crew of the future.

TRUST YOUR LEADS

“The way to make people trust-worthy is to trust them.” Hemingway was not writing about the relationship between the lead carpenter and the employer, but this concept of trust provides a foundation for the lead carpenter's success nonetheless. Lead carpenters have a hand in nearly every important company system. Companies that put their full trust in their leads to produce, train, manage subs and clients, and understand the financial side of a project (sometimes through a “trust but verify” approach) create the environment in which a lead carpenter can be successful both on today's projects and in the future. The importance of the future is often overlooked when thinking about a lead carpenter's job. Cultivating long-term relationships with clients, subcontractors, suppliers, and crew members is vital to the long-term career of a lead carpenter. The road to



Photo: Sara Lukaszewicz

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this future is paved with trust.

Even the most inexperienced workers are tuned into the level of trust the owner or manager of a company has in their immediate supervisors. I believe that those at the bottom of the company ladder often have a clearer view of those above them than the owners and managers at the top have of those below. The lead carpenter occupies a rung of the ladder near the middle, and when trusted and respected, provides an important link between the top and bottom of the ladder. A company culture in which a crew sees that the lead has the full trust and respect of the company owner is the tool that builds the foundation for the worker-centered crew.

THE MOST IMPORTANT TOOL OF ALL

Without workers, there is no crew. And without the labors of the crew, the job does not get done. Whether you subcontract every aspect of a job, have an in-house crew, or have a mix of the two, workers are the tool that produces the labor that completes the job. The demand for workers in the construction trades is at historic levels. To compete in this marketplace, many companies have begun to look inward at their culture to create structures and systems that make the work experience more fulfilling. And it's not always just about higher salaries. Benefits, alternative or flexible work hours, company events that foster comradery, a sense of purpose, and community building all contribute to making a company a desirable place to work and build a career. These strategies are no longer optional "nice to haves" but are increasingly "must haves" for attracting and retaining people who will commit to putting in the time and concentration needed to learn the job.

A NOTE TO YOUNG WORKERS

If you are a young person—or someone contemplating a career change—reading this magazine, please know that this industry needs you. Our trades need you. You can build a career from learning a craft. Carpentry, painting, masonry, plumbing, electrical: Any of these can provide opportunities to own a business, serve

your country, provide for a family, and even travel the world. But first, you have to learn. The learning will be difficult, but in the right mindset, the learning will be enjoyable, and before long, you will develop valuable skills.

Trade skills—like those discussed in the previous article in this series—will unlock your ability to execute the work. The skills are what define a tradesperson and not his or her ability to execute the work. Keeping this in mind will help you focus throughout your early years when you may not be performing tasks that seem relevant. It is during this time that it is important to be earnest and take full advantage of opportunities to work alongside the veterans of your industry—ask questions during break, show up early, help out on a side job, or offer your help on one of the many projects that nearly all tradespeople have going on in their own homes.

The internet has become a vast encyclopedia of knowledge and there is no shortage of websites, magazines, podcasts, blogs, newsletters, social media posts, and more out there waiting for you to discover them. While you will find a tremendous amount of learning on your employer's jobsites, taking advantage of the wealth of information in books and on the internet to fill in the gaps will set you apart from your peers.

It's not just about higher salaries. Benefits, flexible work hours, company events that foster comradery, a sense of purpose, and community building all contribute to making a company a desirable place to work and build a career. These strategies are no longer optional "nice to haves" but are increasingly "must haves" for attracting and retaining committed people.

You will never learn it all. No one does. Understanding and accepting this will put you on a path of lifelong learning where you will become part of the continuum of the building trades. You will stand on the shoulders of those who came before you. And on your shoulders will stand the workers of the future.

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