

Building a Worker-Centered Crew

Part 1: Foundations

Our industry excels at filling physical voids: Foundation holes, wall cavities, joist and rafter bays, and empty cabinets are among the many voids we jump at to fill. But over the last decade, this industry has failed in its attempt to fill another important void: young workers. Lead carpenters like myself need to be at the center of the solution. By definition, a lead carpenter sits at the crossroads of production and business, putting us in the exact right spot to influence how new workers are nurtured in a company.

In a series of articles, I will explore ways of developing a “worker-centered crew,” an idea that was inspired by David Gerstel’s concept of an “employee-centered company” and has grown out of my work with production and business systems throughout my 15-year career as a lead carpenter. In this first article, I’ll share how my job came about and what I’ve learned about running jobs, training young workers, and building a crew. The goal of this exploration is to serve others who need to bring apprentices into the trades and who understand that helping them reach their full potential benefits not only the apprentices but also the company.

THE FOUNDATION ON WHICH EVERY JOB IS BUILT

“I run the job” is typically the answer a site superintendent, foreman carpenter, or lead carpenter will give when asked what they do. Depending on who you work for, and where, there is often little difference between the duties performed by the tradespeople holding these titles. I have held all three, and the differences have come down to whether or not my required dress fits the task of the day—am I swinging a sledgehammer when wearing khakis and dress shoes or holding client meetings covered in mud and dust?—and the amount of “neck down” work expected of me along with the “neck up” demands of running the job.

Regardless of job title and footwear, when a tradesperson is given the task of running a job, it generally comes with a triangle of obligations. This triangle consists of our immediate supervisor (often the owner of the company who assumes the financial risk to employ us); the client for whom we are building the project; and labor—both our crews and our subs. Without the men and women who work under our direction, we cannot fulfill our obligations to the company owner and the client. Labor is the foundation on which the job is built, and our ability to meet the needs of our employers and our clients is directly tied to how well we meet the needs of those who work under us.

Recently, my crews have tended to be on the younger, inexperienced end of the spectrum. Their needs are different from those of the grizzled, old carpenter who enjoys pointing out his superior knowledge and telling you how much more relaxing his life is now that he is no longer running work, taking evening phone calls, or attending Saturday meetings with clients. For up-and-coming tradespeople, the focus is on motivating and training, and for me, this challenge led me to start by reflecting on how I got to where I am today.

FOUNDATION FOR A CAREER

My favorite part of being a tradesman is working with different tradespeople and seeing how they perform their work. We all do things differently and bearing witness to this forms the founda-

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tion for a young tradesperson’s career. “When you drive home, think about the new things you learned today” is as good advice for me today as it was on the day I first heard it. But the more I think about the lessons learned through the experience of being a lead carpenter, the more I see how those I worked under orchestrated my opportunities for learning.

Just as two carpenters will have two methods for hanging doors or cutting rafters, two lead carpenters will have different approaches to running work. And all carpenters will have different approaches to working with those with less experience. Though the method by which a door is hung or a roof is framed is unlikely to show in the finish product, the future skill set of any young tradesperson will clearly reflect the lead carpenter’s approach to running work. This sets a high bar for how we as lead carpenters nurture new hires.

Two years into my carpentry apprenticeship—with three years

of general construction laboring as a foundation—my boss, Dan, asked me what I felt I had learned and could do competently. Like most young tradesmen in their early 20s, I way overshot my answer. It was early in the roaring 2000s and we were building panelized homes and apartment buildings in the Milwaukee area as fast as farmland could be turned into building lots. I thought after five years of working in a boom market and having two years of apprenticeship school under my belt that I could figure my way through any trim detail or kitchen problem that Dan could throw at me.

A month or two passed while I was allowed to work largely unsupervised except for a daily check-in by the subdivision site foreman and a Thursday visit from Dan to drop off my check and maybe a box of 2-inch finish nails or the like. I enjoyed the freedom of working alone, but I could see that the subdivision was nearly complete and before long, there would not be another house to trim. On a Monday morning in December, I met Dan at a condo complex our framers had put up over the summer. When Dan got out of his black Chevy 3500 van, I immediately saw that he was carrying a Nextel two-way radio clipped to a file folder.

Every site foreman at the company always carried their Nextel and the job file folder. Dan handed me the one I saw him holding and walked me around the site explaining that I would be running the interior trim work at this site—due to the holidays approaching, it would start off slow, but by the end of winter, I would have a crew

of my coworkers working under my direction. That was obviously a big turning point in my career—one I want to underscore because it marked the moment I went from being a participant to being committed to my career. Dan got it. Employers, and those who nurture employees on an employer's behalf, need to recognize that it's in these moments that a career is made. If we are going to hire, train, and grow committed employees, we need to be open to making these moments possible for individuals.

What Dan (and many others I worked under during my apprenticeship) created was a forum for action that provided the opportunity for a young tradesperson to hone both “neck up” and “neck down” skills and put those skills to the test. Not all companies I've worked for, however, provided this forum; only those with strong business systems and fluid communication between office and field proved to have the essential ingredients. Our having a long view on workers' needs is also vital to their ability to prosper, and by extension, for the company to thrive as well. Our commitment to providing opportunity for young crews serves as the foundation on which to build a worker-centered crew. In the next article, I'll delve into the framework needed for those new workers to thrive while they are still green and not yet committed to the trades.

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