



## Learning from Others' Mistakes

by William A. Lotz, P.E.

The architect required foil-backed gypsum wallboard as the combined vapor barrier and interior finish. The specifications read "Provide aluminum-foil-backed tape behind all joints to maintain vapor barrier."

I have no idea how the contractor could possibly have done what the architect's specifications required. However, the contractor had a legal obligation to either follow the drawings or point out *in writing* that the detail was impossible and ask for a change. The contractor, in this case, chose not to make an issue of the

but learning from others' problems is much less expensive and traumatic.

### Learning the Easier Way

There are many inexpensive ways to learn. Attend at least one builders' conference or workshop yearly. There are at least a zillion each year—some nearby and some off in resort areas. Carefully choose one that seems to offer the most information for the time and cost.

I have attended countless conferences and workshops in the past 30 years. At least 50 percent of the

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**The situation was a costly learning experience for the contractor. Learning is a necessary part of business, but learning from others' problems is less expensive.**

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problem, and made only a brief verbal comment at a job meeting.

### Learning the Hard Way

Due to the lack of sealed joints in the "vapor barrier" on this job, there is now serious damage from condensation. The contractor and the architect are being sued for about \$2,000,000 for repairs to the building, and the owner has hired me as an expert witness. (I will report on this as a case study in the future.)

By ignoring the joints in the vapor barrier, the contractor left himself exposed. The lawsuit could have been avoided if the contractor had written a strong letter to the architect, the

speakers are boring. If you can find just one morsel of advice from each speaker, however, it will be worth your time. Write down that morsel and never, ever, attend a workshop without a notebook. Try to avoid salespeople-speakers; they have the podium primarily to sell you their product.

Join a trade association that has local monthly meetings. Get to know your competitors. Listen to their experiences and learn from their errors.

Subscribe to several trade journals and read them cover to cover. It is worth your time. Do yourself a favor and give your key employees sub-

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owner, and anyone else involved. He should have stated the problem with the plans and specs, asked for a revised design, and refused to accept liability for the original design, which could not be performed in the field. Or he could have taken a more diplomatic approach and made a phone call to the architect. The contractor's fatal flaw was to "wing it" and ignore the situation.

Turning away from problems is always bad business. Instead, as we said when I worked for a large corporation, "CYA"—cover your a--.

This situation was a costly learning experience for the contractor. Learning is a necessary part of business,

scriptions to the best journals (*New England Builder*, of course). Ask them an occasional question to make sure they are reading them.

When you use a product, obtain the manufacturer's literature and read it. It's biased, but you'd be surprised at what you can learn.

And, finally, don't be afraid to ask questions. Some people don't ask since they fear it shows their ignorance. Well, only the contractor who knows everything (and there are very few of them around) doesn't need to ask questions.

Learning is good business! ■  
*William A. Lotz is a consulting engineer in Acton, Maine.*