

Is the Lead Carpenter System for You?

by Tim Faller

For the past 15 years, I've been working with remodeling companies, providing training in the lead carpenter system. With this job-management approach, you put one person on a job, and that person works by himself as long as he is safe and productive. The premise is that efficiency drops as you assign additional crew members to the site.

In this article, I'll address the most common questions I've been asked by company owners who are implementing their own lead carpenter system.

Paperwork vs. Production

Q. *If the lead carpenter is spending time ordering materials, answering questions, and filling out paperwork, when does he have time for production?*

A. First of all, the idea that paperwork is a waste of time has to be discarded by both the contractor and the lead carpenter. From my perspective, the person most qualified to accurately process job-site paperwork is the lead carpenter. Looked at this way, it's not a waste but a profitable use of time.

Companies should evaluate how much paperwork they want the lead to be responsible for, and of course try to keep it to a minimum so there's time for production. Also, consider who on your staff is best qualified to do paperwork accurately and what you're willing to pay.

Time spent in production will vary, depending on how much paperwork you require and the size and complexity of each job. Large jobs require more management time: When a job's volume reaches \$400,000 to \$500,000, the lead really becomes a project manager and can't do significant production work. At that point it may be better to simply have a site manager who does no production.

Most of the companies around the country using lead carpenters are smaller-volume businesses. A survey I've conducted at my seminars indicates that lead carpenters in every region generally spend between 10 percent and 20 percent of their time in management and the rest in production. Bear in mind that this includes all of the management, not just the paperwork, which doesn't need to — and shouldn't — take very much time.

What Happens When the Work Slows Down?

Q. *What about jobs where the lead carpenter has nothing to do after the subs come in?*

A. It shouldn't happen. The owner needs to train the leads to plan their work so they remain productive. This may mean saving the siding or roofing work until the subs are inside the addition, or having the leads do some of the work themselves that would normally be done by subs. It may mean doing some work out of sequence. In certain cases, you may start setting doors and running trim while the drywall finisher is still blocking and skimming. It may not be ideal, but it avoids idle time.

If this doesn't work on every job, try to save warranty work from previous jobs. Or keep a running list of all the little jobs your clients have asked you to do but you couldn't get to — a sort of client handyman service that helps fill in the gaps in your larger jobs. It's still important for the lead to check in with the subs and clients on the current job at the beginning and end of the day, to maintain continuity.

Hiring a Lead

Q. *What do you look for most in hiring, good people skills or good carpentry skills?*

A. Both skills are critical, so I would interview with both in mind. If you have to settle for one over the other, go for the people and management skills, then train your lead in carpentry (assuming, of course, that he has a working knowledge of carpentry and some native skill.) If you must hire a novice carpenter, try to give him at least six months working with another lead before he goes out on his own jobs.

Floating Helpers

Q. *Should I have fixed crews, or should workers float?*

A. In the lead carpenter system, there are no crews. The leads are the crews, and the helpers, second carpenters, and laborers float among them as needed. This call is made by the

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lead, in coordination with the contractor or other office staff, such as the production manager.

Leads Should Know the Budget

Q. *How aware is the lead carpenter of the budget?*

A. I believe that the lead carpenter should be fully aware of the budget for the job he's on. After all, you are asking the lead to manage the job to make a profit. He can't do that if he doesn't know where costs stop and profit begins.

For example, say a lead is ordering fascia trim. He may want to order what's needed, plus some, just in case. Properly trained, however, the lead will consult his budget and understand the need to order precisely and use every piece. If he's planning the framing, he can look at the budget and see if it will allow for a third man or if he can make do with two until the third carpenter is really critical. If your lead doesn't know the budget, that means someone else is making all those calls, and that will cost you extra time and money.

Be aware that you can't simply hand the lead the budget and expect him to use it well. Training the lead to think in terms of the budget is an ongoing process and a critical part of this system.

Training the Competition?

Q. *How do you protect yourself from lead carpenters who leave the company and take your clients and leads?*

A. The fact is, workers in this business tend to move around a lot, and it's possible that one of your lead carpenters will someday become a competitor. Still, the important question to ask is not "How do I protect myself?" but "Is this employee more valuable to me trained or left in the dark?" You're better off training him and giving him good reasons to stay, like a positive company culture and fair pay.

Some companies have their employees sign noncompete clauses when they hire them. These are typically in force during employment and for a year after. I would recommend consulting with a lawyer before taking this step.

Getting Clients to Trust Leads

Q. *As we adopt this approach, how do I get my existing clients to start deferring to the lead carpenter instead of relating exclusively to me?*

A. The preconstruction conference is the key to "passing the baton" of command. At the meeting, the salesman

— often the owner — tells the client that it's time to turn the project over to production and from then on the client should go to the lead carpenter with questions. Then turn the meeting over to production. In some companies there may be both a production manager and a lead carpenter, but in most companies, "production" will be just the lead carpenter. And although it's important for the contractor to step back at this point, it's equally important to let the client know you're still available if really needed.

The next step is to not allow the client to draw you back in. Even after the baton-passing, it's likely that the clients will call you. Stay involved, but turn the questions back to the lead when it's his domain. For example, if a client calls and wants to know why a clause in the contract is so vague, that's your concern. But if the client has a question about the schedule, or wants to know why a wall was moved over, that should be handled by the lead. Simply say, "Have you asked Bob about that?" and you'll have deferred to the lead very easily. It will take only a few times before most clients turn to the lead for all such questions.

Inevitably, you'll encounter a few clients who won't allow you to step out. Handle this tactfully but come to an agreement — in writing if necessary — about what each person's role will be.

Handing Off the Punch List

Q. *How do I know when to move a lead carpenter on to the next job? On the one hand, there's pickup work to be done that the lead is familiar with. On the other, I'd rather have him start a new job and bring in a less skilled person do the pickup work. How should I handle this?*

A. In theory, the lead carpenter should stay until every little detail is resolved and the client is completely satisfied. In practice, this rarely happens.

Here's a common scenario. Suppose all that remains on the current job are items for subs to complete — perhaps the installation of a dishwasher that had been back-ordered, or a paint touch-up list to take care of. But your next job, once it starts, will require all of the lead's time and attention, not just a part of the day.

By planning ahead, you can successfully manage both job phases. Have the lead begin laying the groundwork for the next job while he is finishing the details on the first. In the remodeling company where I used to work, we developed a job-completion policy whereby the lead began final punch-out three weeks before the actual completion date. During this period the lead would meet with the client

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every week to go over all outstanding tasks. Meanwhile, we would bring in a competent carpenter or helper to work with the lead so that all the details of the job would be transferred and we could be certain that everything would be neatly tied up. There is a cost to this transfer of information, but we found that it was worth it, as one job ended satisfactorily while the next one began smoothly.

Making the Transition

Q. *I know that switching to the lead carpenter system will help me grow and maintain quality. But I'm pretty sure that none of my carpenters want to have that much responsibility. Do I need to start over and hire all new people?*

A. The transition to the lead carpenter system can be complicated if you have employees already on board who balk at the idea of change. There are several steps you can take.

First, be sure you clearly outline what you expect a lead carpenter to do and then properly train the individuals to help them move into the lead position. Point out that, in

many cases, the workload will not change substantially right away. Rather, there will be a gradual increase in workload — and even then it will not be oppressive. Paperwork may seem overwhelming for some potential lead carpenters. But in actuality, the paperwork associated with a single job rarely takes more than 10 to 15 minutes a day. Help the leads understand this.

Second, figure out if one of your carpenters wants to try out the lead role for a while. Pick the carpenter who seems most interested and ask him to give it a try. If it works for him, he may be able to influence another to join in.

Last, you could hire a new carpenter as a lead and use the others as second carpenters. They'll either stay right where they are, content with their earnings, or leave to look for work elsewhere — or maybe they'll see the benefits and join in. However it goes, you're better off.

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