

BY KYLE DIAMOND

Getting Out of the Field

My father, Dale Diamond, and I are partners in a residential remodeling business in Millbrook, N.Y. Together, we run an 11-person company; we have six employees working on site and five in the back office (including Dale and myself, and three part-time employees who help with marketing, bookkeeping, and administration).

I've been working in construction for about 25 years. For most of that time, I wore a toolbelt and worked on site, and for the last 20 years, I also managed projects.

In the past five years, however, I've pulled myself off the construction site and moved into the office, taking on a new role with our company. During that same period, our company's business volume has grown from about \$800,000 a year to about \$2 million a year—growth that would not have been possible without my making the transition from being a tradesman and job supervisor to being a business owner and business manager.

That transformation for our company has been interesting and rewarding, but not always easy. And I have had to learn a lot along the way.

CHANGING YOUR MINDSET

Six years ago, my thinking was: "I love my work. Why would I ever leave the field?" I was proud of being one of the best craftsmen on the job. If I left, who would run the jobs and get the projects built?

But as I thought about it, I realized that as a business owner working mostly on site, all I owned was my own job. I didn't have something that would function and have value without my personal labor. As long as that remained true, my company's growth and value would be limited by me.

If you're in that situation, I recommend reading widely to expand your thinking. I started with "Who Moved My Cheese?" by Spencer Johnson, which got me thinking about change. I also enjoyed "The E Myth," by Michael Gerber, which is aimed directly at people

who, like so many small contractors, have great technical skills but few business skills. A third book, "The One-Minute Manager," by Ken Blanchard and Spencer Johnson, has helped me overcome a tendency to micro-manage and be a perfectionist—great qualities in a craftsman but not such positive traits for a business manager. The final book on my favorites list is "Raving Fans," by Ken Blanchard and Sheldon Bowles, which focuses on how to turn great customer service into a strong marketing asset and a good source of referrals.

I have also benefited from attending trade shows such as JLC Live and from taking classes sponsored by local lumberyards and product vendors. Those are good ways to learn about the perspective of a business owner, as opposed to the mindset of a craftsman whose contribution is strictly the product of his construction skills.

In addition to reading and taking classes, we hired a business coach, who has been helping us define our goals and implement formal systems for improving our business performance.

Finally, I continually look for mentors: people who are successful in business and who might be willing to help me grow and develop in my role as a business owner. Two business associates, brothers who run a gutter company in my market, have been particularly helpful to me. Beyond learning from them directly, watching them develop and expand their own business has been beneficial. I hire them for my projects, and they refer work to me; because we're not competitors, they've been willing to talk frankly to me about business choices. In fact, they are the ones who first said to me six or seven years ago, "Kyle, you have to get out of the field and start being a businessman."

REPLACING YOURSELF ON SITE

There are many obstacles to making the switch from field production. For most of us, the biggest one is probably this: If I don't build our jobs, who will? Obviously,

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the answer is that you have to hire somebody else to do the job you've been doing. And that means looking at hiring differently.

When you're running your jobs yourself, the tendency is to hire young, inexperienced people who don't know very much. They need a lot of management. You can't leave them alone on the site, or they'll make mistakes, but if you micromanage their work—as I tended to do—they never develop the skill to work independently.

After operating that way for years, we realized that our labor cost wouldn't increase by that much if we brought in a more-qualified employee. For that small investment, we would gain not only an employee who would be able to take on increasing responsibility and contribute more and more to the success of the company, but also the time I would need to focus on growing our business.

We got lucky in our first hire after reaching this conclusion: A qualified person who we already knew agreed to join our company. At that point, I was not quite ready to pull out of the jobsite, and we were able to make sure that the fit was right before we committed to having our new employee take over my on-site role. As the company grew, we continued using our new hiring approach so we had more lead carpenters to run more jobs.

REDEFINING YOUR ROLE

With lead carpenters handling the work on site, I now have time for a new set of responsibilities. For one, I run our marketing. This included overseeing the redesign of our website. I develop our strategy for blogs and social media, and I network extensively in our local area, cultivating contacts among real-estate brokers and architects and participating in business groups such as the Chamber of Commerce—all with a view to generating sales leads and driving calls in our direction.

I also handle sales, so when calls come in, I follow up. I pre-qualify leads on the telephone; if they seem like good prospects, I meet with the customers. I develop a scope of work and an estimate (which we charge for).

I still have some responsibility for production management, as well, making occasional site visits as needed to keep our projects on track. On site, I meet with our clients to keep them updated about progress on the job and about where they stand in terms of percent completion and progress payments (and sometimes I meet with them just to keep them from distracting the site supervisor and his crew).

LEAD CARPENTER/JOB SUPERVISOR DESCRIPTION

A formal, written description of the lead carpenter's duties, and the abilities required, has helped us stay focused on our goals as we hire, train, and supervise individuals for that position. Here's what our lead carpenter job description says.

OBJECTIVES:

- To ensure company and customer satisfaction through professional appearance, expert workmanship, and polite communication
- To ensure jobsite safety and enforce jobsite rules for the clients, their property, and all workers
- To be responsible for the efficient and profitable use of the company's time, manpower, materials, tools, and equipment for each project as assigned by the production manager

QUALIFICATIONS:

- Good communication and organization skills
- Strong teaching and leadership skills (must command respect of the work crew and be able to motivate them)
- Extensive rough and finish carpentry skills with superior craftsmanship
- A good working knowledge of related building trades

RESPONSIBILITIES:

- Read and interpret paperwork (plans, specifications, change orders, and so on); bring questions, discrepancies, and unusual conditions to the attention of the production manager
- Coordinate scheduling and details (including materials and subcontractors) with the production manager
- Participate in production meetings and jobsite inspections with the production manager
- Make work assignments, supervise carpenters, and monitor quality
- Train apprentices as time allows
- Maintain regular client contact for duration of project

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Then, once the job has been completed, I keep in touch with our clients to check on their long-term satisfaction with the work, and to prospect for referrals.

There's also the big picture. It's my job to keep an eye on our future: to develop the company's long-run strategy, to define our goals, and to continue refining and implementing the systems that we hope will get us there.

DEVELOPING SYSTEMS

By "systems," I mean that we're working on writing down every important process in our company. That includes written job descriptions for our lead carpenters. It includes a standard contract and scope of work. It includes a written process for the entire sequence of a job—from generating leads and making sales calls through holding scope-of-work meetings, estimating, bidding, signing the contract, staging the job, handing off to the production team, managing production, creating the punch list, con-

ducting the exit interview, and providing proactive warranty service. And it includes things like our simple, easy-to-read form for routine meetings with clients, which updates them on the progress of the job and where they stand on payment.

The goal is to have a business that supports you, instead of a business that you have to support. If you create systems for your business that can work when you're not there, you create time for yourself: time to work on growing your business and time to enjoy your life and your family. And you create value in your business that may be there for you if circumstances don't allow you to keep working the way you're working today.

Working in the office instead of on the jobsite may not be what every person wants. You may love working on site every day, and you may want to keep doing it. But even if that's the case, you will still benefit from having systems that organize the way your company works. It's worth it to carve out a little time every day, or every week, to work on the systems that help you run your company, instead of having your company run you. That way, if you do change your mind about having that toolbelt on every day, you'll have the option of doing things differently.

Kyle Diamond co-owns New Dimension Construction in Millbrook, N.Y., with his father, Dale Diamond.

The lead carpenter job description (see page 34) specifies the duties of the skilled craftsman hired to replace the author on site. At right are the responsibilities that remain for the author as company owner and production manager—easily a full-time job.

