

BY IAN SCHWANDT

Building a Worker-Centered Crew

Part 2: The Framework

When we watch experts ply their trade, whether they are carpenters, NFL quarterbacks, painters, chefs, or plumbers, we often marvel at how effortlessly they achieve a high-level product. Look behind the scenes, however, and you will find the framework that provides the support for the skills needed to produce at such a high level. Scholars have attempted to quantify this in terms of hours worked—I've frequently seen 10,000 hours cited. Coaches push drills that enforce an order of execution. Practice, practice, practice. But we share one thing in common with these experts—at one point, on day zero, we all knew nothing about our trades.

It is here that lead carpenters find themselves in the center of another triangle—this time, of influences instead of obligations: the strength of the employer's business systems, the quality of the communication between all parties to the work, and the needs of the worker. If the training needs of the worker are high, the lead carpenter can meet those needs effectively only if backed by clearly defined scopes of work and project objectives, strong project management and company financials, and a clearly expressed commitment from the employer to develop young tradespeople. In my career, I have frequently encountered business systems that ran in conflict with one another. There are a range of challenges that flow from poorly defined and executed business systems, including difficulty retaining workers and poor productivity as the crew struggles to understand what's expected. One of the biggest culprits is an opaque or conceptual scope of work that leads to inaccurate labor estimates; if forced to work with those, no lead carpenters can be effective in moving a young worker's career forward from day zero.

REMEMBER DAY ZERO

Rather than blame the business, though, we often blame workers. Sit around a table or a bar with veteran tradespeople and you will undoubtedly hear stories of “young people these days.” They cannot read a tape measure. They don't own tools. They disappear at lunch on their first day and never come back—not even for their check! The lead carpenters who will be effective at passing the trade to the workers of tomorrow will be the ones who can hear these complaints, step back, and think critically about why these are common themes and what they can do to provide the neck-up training needed for novices to grow into productive crew members.

Many of us fall into the “this is the only thing I've ever done” camp, and it is not easy to remember back to day zero and how little we knew at the time. No one is born knowing how to read a tape measure, much less what tape measures are better suited for framing than for cabinetmaking. By the time we have reached the level of lead

carpenter, we have performed the tasks so many times, it becomes robotic. Getting in touch with your own “inner robot” is important for understanding how to quickly elevate the novices on your crew.

Neuroscientists believe that as our brains learn new skills, the storage of those skills is sourced to different parts of the brain. Over time and in the right environment, the skills that young tradespeople learn will move across the brain and end up stored in the same area as skills like riding a bike. This is the robot part of the brain. Just as we likely don't remember individual bike-riding lessons, we also no longer remember what it was like to not know how to read

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a tape measure. Experiments by neuroscientists at the University of California at Berkeley have also shown how stress affects the passage of new skills and information to the robot part of the brain, with moderate levels of stress being more conducive to learning than low and high levels.

SEE CLEARLY HOW CREW MEMBERS LEARN

Understanding how to apply these concepts to our crews can boost our ability to develop young tradespeople. Not everyone learns the same way and one person's moderate stress level is another's mental breakdown. Most lead carpenters I know have a “go to” crew member who they routinely trust with important tasks. Oftentimes, I have found my “go to” in unexpected places. A lead carpenter who is aware of his crew is able to see what a novice tradesperson may have a knack for. When we look deeper into what makes a person the “go to” for a task, it will tell us a lot about how that person learns. And when we know how that crew member learns, we as lead carpenters can create optimal situations tailored to the individual.

We have to see where the novice is at. Knowing nothing in the presence of experts is an unsettling place to be, especially in an age when we can access all of the world's knowledge via the devices we keep in our pockets. Lead carpenters need to understand how this environment plays into the psyche of the novice and set our expectations accordingly. In most of the day-to-day work performed in the building trades, expert-level talent is not required and much can

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be achieved with basic competency and confidence. This first step is the largest and most difficult one to take.

New crew members, especially green ones, are typically a resource drain. That's why once we have gained some experience, we tend to place a high value on others with the same level of experience, and a low value on novices (just like the seasoned carpenters lamenting the kids these days). To succeed in creating a strong neck-up environment, you don't have to remember what it was like not to know what "the little line" on a tape measure meant, only that at one point you didn't know that it was $\frac{1}{16}$ inch. It's from this point of view that you'll be able to build a list of the important baseline skills needed for a new hire to contribute to the job at hand in a meaningful way.

By now you may be thinking, "I have a job to run. I don't have time for all this head-shrinking stuff." I argue that for the lead carpenter, this requires only a subtle, but necessary, change in your awareness of your crew and of your employer. Viewed from within the triangle

of responsibilities—to owner, employer, and crew—the lead is the most direct conduit for change within a company. We have our boots not only in the jobsite mud but also on the hardwood floor of the company HQ. This perspective is our greatest asset to our employers, to

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our crew, and, most important, to ourselves. In the next article in the series, I'll break down the skills, both neck up and neck down, that I have found to be most impactful in creating value for the company and in building basic competency and meaning for the worker.

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