

Construction Managers and Superintendents...Saviors of the Industry or Overgrown Babysitters

By Monroe Porter

Construction is and always will be hard work. As we grow older, our knees creak, our back stiffens and our body aches in the morning. The goal for many construction workers is to get out of the field into a middle management job. A white hat, cell phone and a white pickup truck are as close to heaven as Joe Hardhat might get while working on this old earth. The real question is “are construction managers cost effective and what should their role really be?”

Modern management has eliminated many middle management positions for numerous industries. Construction has been slow to follow. The dream of getting out of the field and riding in a shiny new pickup may be playing a heavy emotional role in keeping that dream alive. Maybe a construction manager or superintendent is the right choice for your organization or maybe it is not the right thing to do. Let's consider some facts and points of view:

Your company size: The size and type of organization you have certainly helps dictate whether a construction manager is the right choice for you. If you only run two crews, employing a \$40,000 a year construction manager may not be a good financial choice. You might consider paying your foremen \$5 an hour more (which is approximately \$10,000 a year) and still be \$20,000 ahead of the game. If you have 5 crews, the cost per crew for the same \$40,000 a year construction manager drops to \$8000 per crew and with 10 crews you are down to \$4000 per crew. As smaller companies grow, the stress mounts. There can be a tendency to simply add bodies to the equation and to desperately obtain some management help. One strategy is to take your best foreman and make that person construction manager. This may or may not be a good strategy. Not only are you losing your best foremen but also if the company is struggling, you have just increased overhead by \$40,000.

Your sales philosophy: If your salespeople take the time to write down a little more detailed and cleaner material list and provide job details during the estimate; ordering materials and managing the job is much easier. A digital camera and some photos can also have a huge impact on communication. If salespeople simply throw the estimate together, then the material must be re-taken off and other details carefully put together by a construction manager or administrative person.

Your job description: What do you want the construction manager or superintendent to do? How often do they visit jobs? How do they allocate manpower? Do they do the scheduling? Are they required to visit each job each day or do they just visit the more technical jobs or jobs at critical times such as start-up? How much training and coaching does the construction manager do? Your goal is for the construction manager to have a mission and not be a babysitter riding around in a pickup truck.

The reality of the job: If you have a construction manager or superintendent, what is he really doing all day long? I challenge you to have him keep a time card on himself and see what he is actually doing all day long. If he spends too much time riding from job to job, aren't you really paying for a lot of road time? How about the supply house? Does he go in and pick up materials? If so, you may have the world's most expensive truck driver? What about job-site visits? I bet you will find much of the time is spent babysitting foremen and correcting what a good foreman should be doing. Here is the real Catch 22, if you hire a good foreman and pay him to do his job. Do you really need someone to babysit the foremen?

So what are some other things that a construction manager type person can do for you?

- **Repair and Small Jobs:** Most contractors get calls for repairs or small jobs and need someone to make those calls and do the work.
- **Troubleshoot:** Jobs are never the same, some harder than others. Some are bigger with the need for bigger crews and more production. Rather than have a construction manager simply run a milk run, you want to make sure he is on the most important job at the most important time.

- **Scheduling:** Scheduling is always a challenge and rain certainly makes it a guessing game. Having someone schedule is a big issue but many smaller contractors handle this by paying the lead foreman an hour or so a day overtime to make it happen. Others rely on the office manager or an admin person to help with scheduling.
- **Training:** Certainly training can be a key job responsibility of the construction manager. There is no oversupply of good trades' people and having an experienced person who can show people what to do is important. But does your construction manager work on the job to train people or play seagull? Many construction managers play seagull; they show up on the job, squawk and dump on people and leave. Some come from the old school and depression era and simply are not good trainers. Others are very technically competent and become upset with those who are not.
- **Enforce policy:** A good construction manager enforces the rules and guidelines. They hire, fire and run ramrod over the organization. Yet many construction managers came from the field and have a field mentality. They want to be the worker's buddy, not boss. So again, make sure your person is qualified to be a good manager.

There are lots of things your construction manager can do other than be an overgrown babysitter or truck driver but you must clearly define the duties and position. Remember, old construction workers never die; they just want to ride around in a pickup truck.

Instead of a construction manager, you might consider these alternatives:

- Have good foremen. It is important to have a leader on the job. Someone who takes the owner's place on the job. Someone who thinks and can run a job. Someone who will let you know in advance if you need more materials. Someone who knows the hours and goals of the estimate. Having a good foreman, just like having good kids, can cut down on the role of babysitting.
- Have a good system. Make sure your system works for ordering material and scheduling jobs. Hold the salesperson, foremen and administration people responsible for getting the details right.
- Have the salesperson or estimator visit the job. Remember the salesperson knows what he or she sold. Also, remember that if you have a good foreman who is both production and customer driven, you do not need to be there everyday and every minute.

So am I against construction managers and superintendents? No, I just want to make sure you are not paying a lot of money for an overgrown babysitter and administration person. Too many organizations have the construction manager or superintendent position defined with skills an experienced tradesperson may not be good at. Administration details, organizational skills, computer literacy, and other office work may not be the ideal job for that 40-year-old construction worker looking to get out of the field. Clearly know what you want from the superintendent or construction manager and know that it will be cost and people effective.

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