

I

manage a framing company that employs over 50 carpenters year round. To keep the business growing, I focus most of my attention on my employees. I believe that keeping them motivated is the most important part of my job. I spend more time working on motivating the crews than any other aspect of the business. Each week I spend hours training crew leaders, implementing new benefits, and thinking up new ways to keep my framers happy. After all, they're the ones out there making the business work. Everything — the quality of work, the rate of production, our reputation and profits — all hinges on them.

Tools For Building Motivation

I use several "tools" for building motivation among my employees.

Bonuses for everyone. We will give a crew leader a personal cash bonus for outstanding performance from a crew. But more importantly, we have a bonus system that includes everyone. A percentage of the profits from all the jobs goes into a pool, and these funds are divided among *all* crew members at the end of each month in which the company earns a profit. Each employee's share is based on his wage earnings for that month, so his bonus is proportional to his merit. This rewards the performance of the company instead of the performance of one crew or one person. This helps to build a company identity, because everyone feels they are on the same team, instead of competing against each other.

Newsletter. Each week we produce a company newsletter that goes out to all my employees to keep everyone abreast of where we are as a company. The main feature of the newsletter is the schedule. We list the jobs that we have lined up and which crews will work on which job.

We also discuss in the newsletter how the jobs are coming in. If a crew did well they get a commendation and if they did poorly, we'll often discuss what went wrong so that other crews don't make the same mistakes.

Another function of the newsletter is to give crews a glimpse at the support they are getting from the office, which helps everyone keep things in perspective. Most employees aren't really sure what a contrac-

tor does. Many think we just drive around and drink coffee all day. From the vantage point of new guys coming on board, running a company looks easy, and before you know it, they think they're contractors, too. I know I felt this way when I was young, but I was sobered to find out that things run smoothly only because someone "behind the scenes" was negotiating the deals, coordinating the deliveries, buying the tools, paying for repairs, billing, collecting,

in the newsletter.

Team spirit. We do other fun stuff to help promote a company-wide team spirit. We sponsor company softball, bowling, and volleyball teams. We also have company jackets, T-shirts, and hats. These are small things, but they mean a lot to the guys.

Structured Meetings

While these motivational tools are important, they would be meaningless if the company wasn't well organized.

We have nine crews, each functioning as its own little company under the umbrella of the parent company. Once we have a project under contract, we schedule it and assign it to a crew leader. They take it from there. They call in their own materials, schedule equipment, work with the client, and negotiate change orders. They also do their own hiring and firing. A job is out of my hands until it's time for billing. The office staff is there to give any kind of support they may need, but unless there's a problem, we stay out of their hair.

To keep all nine crews in sync with each other, we have weekly meetings every Wednesday evening. All my crew leaders get paid to attend. In addition, we invite a representative who is nominated from the ranks of each crew to sit in.

The meeting is carefully structured. We start by going around the room, crew leader by crew leader, discussing individual jobs. The crew leaders turn in their time sheets. We review each crew's particular needs, such as equipment, materials, and manpower. As we go, we compile a list of what's needed. Once we've heard from everyone, we make adjustments. If one crew is short-handed and another has too many people, we switch guys around until we get the balance we want.

After we've gotten all the men and equipment lined out, we discuss jobs that we're bidding and negotiating, payment problems, safety concerns, changes in insurance requirements, legal issues, and other general information. We also talk about financial matters. Everyone in the company participates in the bonus plan, so we all keep a watchful eye on the bottom line.

We offer a chance for the crew reps to speak up. The crew rep is there to keep a flow of information going back to each crew. In turn, we ask for input from them.

Working Hard for Your Employees

by Michael Davis

Speed and quality in production depend on the people who work for you. Give them all you've got.

accounting, paying taxes and insurances, and handling the lawsuits.

The newsletter is also a good opportunity to give recognition to individuals for their achievements. While we want all our workers to be team players, we can't lose sight of the fact that everyone needs personal recognition. We have a program called "Framer of the Month." Every week the carpenters on each crew nominate the crew member they think has been working the hardest. The nominees are listed in the newsletter. At the end of each month, the framer with the most nominations wins a cash bonus of fifty dollars and recognition

Whether it's a production issue, safety concern, or policy matter, we want to know what we should be doing better.

We share a great deal of information with our people, far more than most companies. But we want our people involved in the decision making process, and they can't make informed decisions without the information.

At the end of every meeting we spend time discussing management.

Teaching Management To Crew Leaders

Since most of the people management in our company is done by crew leaders, it's important to train them how to manage effectively. And since our crew leaders are promoted from the ranks, we need to help them make the transition.

A supervisor's first duty is to supervise. This is a very difficult message to get across to a tradesperson who is used to working physically all day. Supervising means making sure that every member of the crew understands exactly what he has to do, and that he has the tools and materials needed for the job. Then, if there's any time left over, the crew leader can beat in a few nails.

To get my crew leaders to start thinking about how to work with people instead of with wood, we have given them all copies of the book *The One Minute Manager*, by Kenneth Blanchard and Spencer Johnson (Berkley Publishing Group, New York, 1981), and we demand that they read it. Some of them weren't real keen on having to do "homework," but with lots of badgering and peer pressure, we got them to read it. Now they say it's helping them with managing the people on their crews.

According to the authors, a manager has three responsibilities. First, a manager must let workers know exactly what he wants done. Second, he must set goals so everyone knows exactly what good production is. Third, he must let workers know where they stand.

Communicating instructions. A crew leader has to make sure he communicates his instructions very clearly. It's critical that a crew leader take the time to do this. When giving instructions, we teach our crew leaders to have a carpenter repeat the instructions in his own words. This gives the crew leader a feel for exactly what the guy understands, so they can fine-tune any misunderstood points.

Typically, a guy doesn't want to appear stupid. When confronted, most guys will say they understand, whether they do or not. I had a boss who would rattle off a ten-page list of instructions and then look me in the eye and ask if I understood. I'd always say "Ah huh, sure." Then he would walk

away and I wouldn't have a clue.

In one of our weekly meetings recently, one crew leader told about how he instructed a carpenter to head out an opening in a TJI roof system. He showed the guy the two pieces of stock he wanted him to use, showed him how to lay it out, and left him alone to do it. The carpenter said that he understood the instructions, but when the crew leader left, the carpenter modeled the opening after a previous one framed with different stock that was needed elsewhere. As a result, the job couldn't be completed on time, and the crew leader lost his temper with the guy.

When this was discussed, everyone at the meeting agreed that it wasn't the carpenter's fault. The crew leader failed to make sure that the carpenter understood what he wanted. If he had taken more time to be sure that his instructions had been understood, the problem could have been avoided.

Setting production goals. Goal setting requires some reasonable estimate for job completion. This starts in the office. We provide each crew leader with an estimate of the man-hours required for each job. In turn, the crew leader shares this information with his crew, so everyone has an idea of how the crew is doing. At the end of each day, they can look at how many man-hours they've used up and see if they're ahead of schedule or behind, and whether they have to hustle to make up for lost time, or just to beat the estimate.

On an individual basis, it's up to an established crew member to give new employees an example of good performance. Most of this responsibility lies with the crew leader because he's the most experienced, but we also encourage advanced carpenters to bring less skilled guys along. Our bonus plan helps us to drive the point home that everyone is in this together. The guys understand that in order for them to get a bonus, the company has to make a profit. If someone isn't pulling his weight, he's limiting everyone's chance to be profitable. It's important to get crew members involved in policing themselves. Getting good performance when the boss is around is easy. The true measure of performance is what happens when the boss isn't around, which is most of the time.

One minute praise. The principle behind the *The One Minute Manager* is summarized by the phrase "Feedback is the breakfast of champions." You let someone know how they are doing with "one minute praises" and "one minute reprimands." It's important to give feedback to every employee, and it's especially important when working with new employees.

A new employee is one of a crew

leader's biggest challenges. The crew leader has to take special care explaining the task at hand, and then watch closely so he can tell if the employee is meeting the expected goals. The idea isn't just to intimidate the guy. Watch the new employee until you can catch him doing something *right*. Let the employee know exactly what he did right and encourage him to continue.

If you're not getting the performance you want, you first have to decide whether this is an "I can't" or an "I won't" problem. If it's "I can't," then you have to redirect the person. This is just a training problem. If it's an "I won't" then you have an attitude problem and a reprimand is in order.

When reprimanding an employee, tell him what he's done wrong, but don't jump all over the guy or humiliate him. Call him aside and discuss the problem in a professional manner. It's important to remember that you are criticizing the person's behavior, not the person. Also, let him know he has value, despite his behavior. Finally make sure that he understands that the reprimand is over. This way you can both get back to doing your jobs and not waste time fuming.

Committing Yourself To Your Employees

We do everything we can to see that our employees get their 40 hours of work each week. They budget family expenses based on a full paycheck, and if they don't get one, it hurts. We can't go so far as to guarantee this, but we will take jobs at cost, or overstaff, in order to keep our people working.

We have gone a step further for our crew leaders. We promise that as long as we have any work at all, they'll have a job, even if it means shoulder-to-shoulder crew leaders. During an especially slow time last winter we had four crew leaders on one job. Needless to say, we took a beating on that one, but the company can afford to lose some money. The guys can't.

Among tradespeople, word gets out in a town in ways you can't control. If one of your employees voices his loyalty on a crowded site, at a local pub, or in a movie line, people will pay attention. You're going to start attracting the best talent in town once they know you're their best bet. This gives you a leg up on your competitor.

This is a strong, competitive notion but it's not something you can control by force or marketing. It's a long drawn-out process that takes years of solid commitment to serving your people. ■

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