REPORT CARDS FOR CARPENTERS

CAROLYN BATES

THOUGH RARELY USED BY SMALL BUILDERS, WRITTEN REVIEWS CAN HAVE FAR-REACHING BENEFITS FOR EMPLOYEE AND EMPLOYER

BY DAVID FRANE

The company that I work for has faced many challenges during its transition from a small remodeling firm to a large-volume custom builder. As its work force grew from a few employees to 20 or 25 field personnel, the owners began relying on foremen and site supervisors to tell them who had earned a pat on the back and who needed a kick in the pants. The day before an employee's review, one of the owners would call the site and ask how the employee was doing. Unfortunately, this didn't work very well. Given a typical day on a building project — with delivery trucks coming and going, subs asking questions, and the phone ringing off its cradle — the tendency, unless the guy had just committed a major blunder, was for the supervisor to say he was doing fine. As a result, the owners began complaining that they were getting mixed messages. When they needed to know why a project had to be redone or had gone over budget, they would hear that so-and-so was slow or had messed up. These were the same so-and-sos who had been doing fine at review time.

A few years ago, we began making supervisors review their carpenters in writing. The problem was that no two supervisors used exactly the same criteria to gauge performance, so the owners still weren't getting the apples-to-apples comparisons they wanted. It wasn't unheard of for one super to rate a carpenter among the best in the company while another called the same carpenter one of the worst. It occasionally happened that both the carpenter and the supervisor would leave the review meeting shaking their heads. The carpenter left wondering why the supervisor didn't realize what a great job he was doing, while the supervisor wondered where in the world the carpenter got the idea that he was doing so well.

In response to these problems, we created a formal set of evaluation guidelines, (see Carpenter Evaluation Form, next page). Our five-level rating system includes performance ratings from "extremely effective" to "not effective." It covers technical skill, work ethic, general work habits, leadership, and teamwork. Using the same criteria to evaluate all carpenters helps us make constructive rather than destructive criticisms — ones that lead to improvement rather than anger. With modification, these criteria can be used to evaluate people in any trade.

Technical Skill

The technical section evaluates basic skills needed by anyone doing carpentry work. It covers (but is not limited to) layout, basic geometry, the use of hand and power tools, knowledge of materials, and familiarity with codes and construction procedures. The categories are quite specific because specific criticisms have more impact than general ones. It's counterproductive to label someone as a lousy

Carpenter Evaluation Form

	Extremely Effective	Very Effective	Effective	Somewhat Effective	Not Effective
1. Technical Skill					
A) Framing and exterior finish:					
Framing layout					
Deck and wall framing					
Roof framing					
Door and window installation					
Flashing					
Siding					
Exterior trim					
Working with staging and pump jacks					
B) Interior finish carpentry:					
Hanging doors					
Standing and running trim					
Cabinet installation					
Stair finish					
C) Special project skills:					
Example:					

2. Work Ethic			**Comments**
A) Does the employee approach work with enthusiasm?	☐ Yes	☐ No	
B) Is the employee willing to work late to meet deadlines?	☐ Yes	☐ No	
C) Is the employee prompt and prepared to work at starting time?	☐ Yes	☐ No	

3. General Work Habits			
A) Does the employee observe safety rules?	☐ Yes	☐ No	
B) Does the employee keep the work area clean and organized?	☐ Yes	☐ No	
C) Do the employee's non-work-related conversations interfere with production?	☐ Yes	☐ No	
D) Does the employee observe company policies?	☐ Yes	☐ No	
E) Does the employee plan and execute the work efficiently?	☐ Yes	☐ No	

4. Leadership and Teamwork			
A) Can the employee run a crew? If so, how large a crew?	☐ Yes	☐ No	
B) Is the employee a team player?	☐ Yes	☐ No	
C) Does the employee tend to get into personality conflicts?	☐ Yes	☐ No	
Is he/she a good communicator?	☐ Yes	☐ No	
D) Does the employee keep the foreman or supervisor informed about potential problems on the job?	☐ Yes	☐ No	

carpenter when the real problem is that he's just not very good at calculating rafter cuts. While he'll be predictably upset by a global criticism of his work, he may be willing to admit that he needs to study up on roof framing. It's also important to acknowledge good performance and to encourage people to keep it up. If someone has a positive approach to a particular aspect of the job, you'll want to help them figure out how to transfer that approach to the tasks they have trouble with.

The technical skill category is broken into three divisions. The first two — framing/exterior finish and interior finish — concern standard carpentry tasks and are fairly straightforward. The reviewer should evaluate the carpenter's skill at doing these tasks, backing up his opinion with specific comments.

The special project skills section covers skills needed to do advanced work. These skills are above and beyond those expected of even the best carpenters. They involve things like the ability to perform difficult layouts (like figuring the chord lengths of arcs, or laying out ellipses) that require knowledge of algebra or advanced geometry. We also have employees who can mill curved moldings, do metal work, rebuild machinery, build furniture, and build boats. Our company doesn't require carpenters to be able to do these things, but it's a plus when they can. This is our chance to acknowledge these special skills.

Work Ethic

Work ethic is the single most important category on the evaluation; you can teach technical skills, but you can't do much about the attitude someone brings to the job. Work ethic includes the employee's enthusiasm for the work, his willingness to work late to meet deadlines, and whether he's on site and prepared to work at starting time. We also keep in mind that a carpenter should be doing more than just making noise and sawdust. It's easy to spot people who haven't figured this out. They're the ones who put more stock on the scrap pile than on the building. Self-disciplined carpenters concentrate on their work, doing the best job with the least waste of time and materials.

General Work Habits

The list of criteria in this category is another checklist, a starting point for further conversations with the carpenter about how to improve his performance. The questions are fairly obvious: Does the employee observe safety rules? Does he plan and execute his work efficiently? Does he talk so much that the people working around him get distracted? Is he such a slob that you need an archaeologist to excavate his work area?

Leadership and Teamwork

A carpenter with all of the technical knowledge in the world is of little use if he can't work as part of a team. Building a house demands cooperation among many people. I've seen too much time and material wasted because each of the three guys working on a project figured he was in charge (the desire to be in charge is much more common than the ability to be in charge). The truth is that different people are in charge at different times; we judge our carpenters on their ability to switch gracefully between both roles.

We're always on the lookout for people who can run a crew. Some people are good at running large crews; others aren't, but are perfectly capable of supervising a couple of other carpenters. There are also top-notch carpenters who shouldn't be managing anyone. The point is that people should do what they're good at; you gain nothing by converting a good carpenter into a lousy foreman.

The qualities that make an effective leader can be hard to explain, but most people know them when they see them. People with the ability to lead can keep track of what's being built, can foresee potential problems, and can solve those problems as they arise. These people know enough to make sure that the proper material and equipment is on hand when it's needed. They can get along with all sorts of people and can communicate information clearly. They know who can handle what projects and can get people to work hard and cooperate.

How a Review Works

The mechanics of the reviews are as follows. At review time the person running the crew evaluates each carpenter using the above criteria. The reviewee gets one of the five ratings for each section on the list of criteria. Reviewers add written comments to elaborate on each rating. The purpose of this is not to create a document for the personnel files, but to give carpenters a clear idea of how they might make themselves more valuable to the company. Before the reviews are handed out, the owners of the company go over them with the reviewers. After the reviews are handed out, the carpenter and the reviewer arrange a short meeting to discuss the contents of the review.

The Benefits

The most obvious benefit of this process is that it helps us rank employees. At minimum, the reviews are like the list Santa Claus keeps of who has been naughty and nice. When the time comes to decide who gets a raise, this is good information to have. And if layoffs become necessary, the review gives us a clear understanding of who we can and cannot afford to lose.

There's also the matter of making job assignments. People aren't interchangeable cogs; it's important to know who is good at what. For example, one of our laborers was scared to death of heights. Everyone knew this but me. We were doing demolition, and for two days I made the poor guy carry debris across a temporary walkway 15 feet in the air. I figured he was just slow. To him, however, each trip must have felt like a tightrope walk over Niagara Falls. When I found out what the problem was, I switched him with someone working on the first floor and he really sped up.

Another example is the carpenter who wants to become a foreman or supervisor but isn't very good at reading blueprints. If that's the problem, tell him. If he's serious about advancing, he's going to put some effort into learning how to read prints. In other words, your observations about a carpenter's strengths and weaknesses should lead him to build on his strengths while trying to eliminate his weaknesses. ■

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