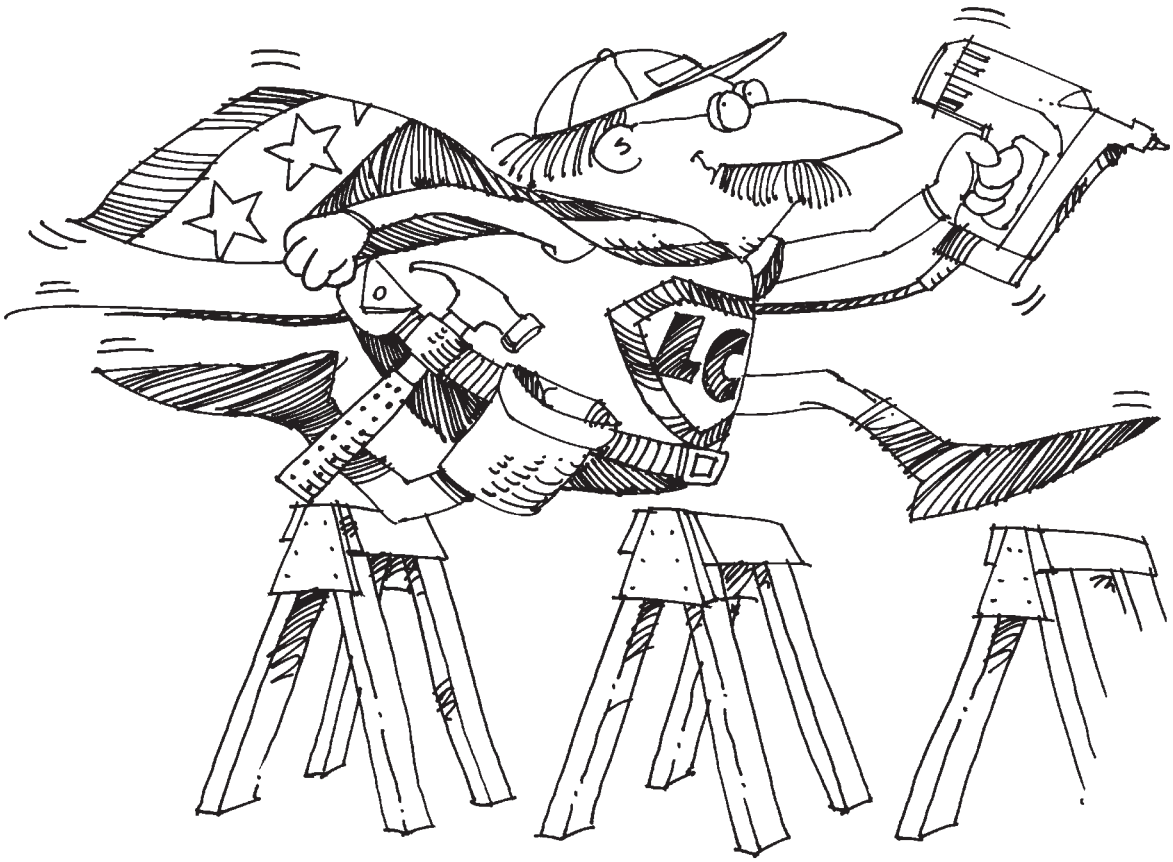
Training Lead Carpenters



ILLUSTRATIONS BY DAN DRABAK

Don't expect carpenters to be good managers unless you teach them the skills they need

Most remodeling contractors will agree that when hiring a good lead carpenter, technical skills are just the baseline requirement. We construction company owners expect lead carpenters to understand the plans and specs, take off and order materials, manage the job site, oversee our production crews and subs, and communicate intelligently and responsibly with clients. In short, we expect them to leap sawhorses in a single bound — like Clark Kent with an air nailer.

Unfortunately, we rarely let our lead carpenters know that we have these expectations, and we don't train them for the job. We simply assume they understand their responsibilities, and that they already have the skills they need or can pick them up as they go along.

I was guilty of these presumptions, too, until I began to notice that my technically competent lead carpenters lacked the management skills necessary to run the job the way I expected. Over time, I realized that hiring a "trade competent carpenter" is merely the framework for a true lead carpenter, but that other aptitudes are also important. I also realized that I wasn't going to "find" good lead carpenters: I would have to "make" them.

by John Sylvestre

Figure 1. *To avoid wasting time at weekly meetings, the author carefully plans the agenda a year in advance. He assigns each topic to a staff member or an outside expert.*

Sylvestre Construction, Inc.
1994 Staff Meeting Agenda

Month	Main Topic	Teaching Detail
Jan.	Goals for the year, TQM	Site cleanup
Feb.	Production efficiency	Coping saw tips
Mar.	Estimating basics	Miter box tips
Apr.	Estimating basics, customer service	Tight miters
May	New materials, new techniques	Installing deadbolts
June	Safety	Hanging doors
July	Subcontractors	Scribing
Aug.	Production tips/techniques	Cabinet installation
Sept.	Hazard communication	Using routers
Oct.	Building codes	Saw tips, cutting techniques
Nov.	Scheduling	Drywall tips
Dec.	Communication skills	Frostbite prevention

A New Job Description

Training employees takes time, money, and energy, but it's a sound investment in your company's future. The payoff may be way down the road, but the sooner you start a training program, the sooner you'll begin to see results.

The first step is to define the goal. I started by getting together with my production manager, field supervisor, and salesperson, and compiling a list of the skills we expected our lead carpenters to master. The new job description included the following:

Management — Answer subcontractor questions and solve problems on site; organize production; supervise the daily work of a carpentry crew.

Scheduling — Create and manage a schedule, both personally and for each job; coordinate the job schedule with the budget.

Communication — Handle positive and negative customer feedback daily; communicate instructions and information effectively to other employees and subs.

Estimating — Produce material takeoffs; coordinate deliveries to minimize extra trips to suppliers.

Technical — Keep current with new systems, techniques, and materials; physically produce on every project.

Future — Become familiar with computers, accounting procedures, safety issues, drafting, and other aspects of company operations.

This is a big list, and we decided that the best way to make it manageable was to break it into parts. We began by concentrating on material takeoff and estimating skills. We needed to improve in this area immediately, plus it was something our field crews were already familiar with. We developed an agenda for the year, including training at monthly meetings, presentations by outside experts, and formal classes (see Figure 1).

Train Without Pain

Our regular monthly company meeting was the natural place to introduce employee training, since we were already in the habit of passing on information in this setting. Our meetings are only about an hour long, so it was important to plan them carefully to allow enough time to accomplish everything. We consolidated housekeeping tasks — current job updates, safety issues, company announcements — and tried to handle company business in the first 15 minutes. We used the rest of the time for training.

We hold our company meetings on the first Wednesday of every month. Midweek is better than Monday, when everyone is occupied with planning the week's work, and much better than Friday, when everyone is looking forward to the weekend. Our crews leave the job early, and we pay them for the hour they spend in the meeting. This not only rewards their participation, it shows them that we're serious about the training.

Professor Sylvestre. We discovered early on that our carpenters were much more talkative

Professor Sylvestre Quiz

Scheduling

1. Production is made up of Labor, Subcontractors & Materials. What percentage of 100 would you assign to each of these?

A. 25% labor, 25% subs & 50% materials
B. 25% labor, 50% subs & 25% materials
C. 33.3% labor, 33.3% subs & 33.3% materials
D. 50% labor, 25% subs & 25% materials

2. What percentage of the total job is made up of production costs?

A. 40% – 50%
B. 30% – 40%
C. 60% – 70%

3. What can you do to increase profitability on a job?

A. Lower production costs
B. Lower overhead
C. Both of the above

4. Why do you need a schedule for a job?

A. It gives the office something to do
B. It gives you an idea of what is going to happen when
C. Lets you know how much time you have to complete the job
D. B & C

5. What problem areas can you address with a schedule?

A. Subcontractors
B. Special-order items
C. Inspections
D. All of the above

6. What items should you keep in mind when you put together a schedule?

A. How much labor help is available, what it costs, what the labor budget is, and when the labor help is needed
B. What is in the specifications and on the blueprints, what the site conditions are, and any possible security problems
C. How many people from SCI and subcontractors can be working at the site at the same time
D. All of the above

Site Management

1. Who is responsible for maintaining an orderly lumber pile?

A. Lead person
B. Laborer
C. All SCI field staff

2. When should you cover the lumber pile?

A. When it looks like rain or snow
B. When the project manager is coming
C. Nightly
D. A & C

3. Who is responsible for getting the dumpster emptied?

A. Office
B. Lead person
C. Office orders dumpster and the lead calls to have it emptied

4. How often do you clean up a job site?

A. At the end of each day
B. Every time it is difficult to work or move around in an area
C. At the start of every day
D. When the job is complete

5. Who is responsible for making sure an open roof is covered at night?

A. The roofer
B. The client
C. The lead person
D. A & C

6. What happens when you assume something?

A. You may get it right and be a hero
B. You make an ASS out of U and ME
C. You may miss the point of the assumption altogether

7. When should the lead person know what the subs are doing?

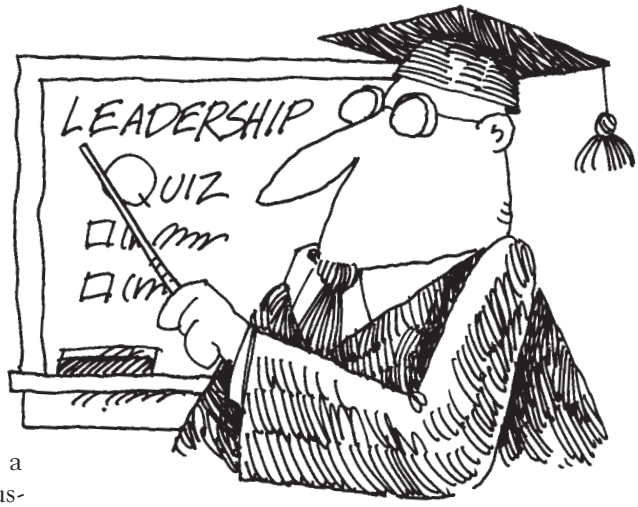
A. At the start of each day
B. The office is responsible for the subs
C. The lead should always have a general idea of what the subs are doing

Estimating Problem

Give the quantity, size, and type of roof trusses you will need for this one-story addition.

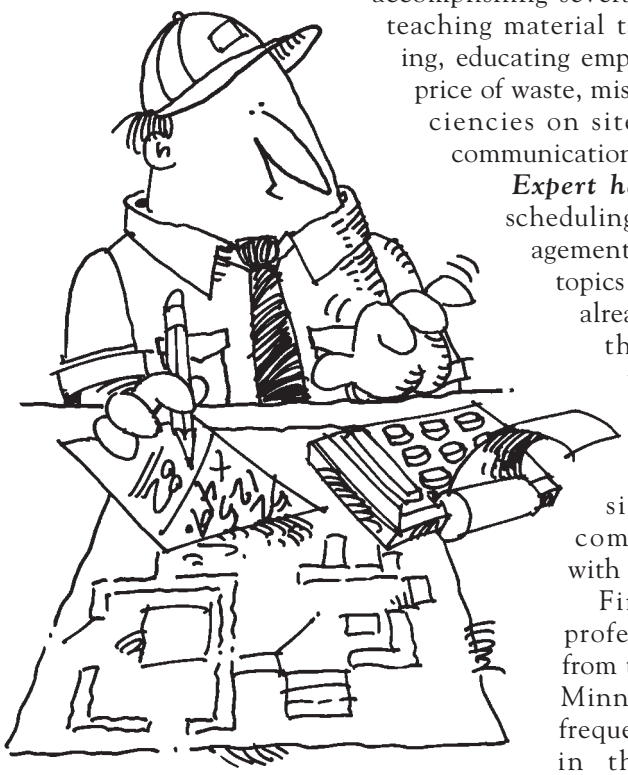
Figure 2. *To get the ball rolling at training meetings, the author devised a series of short multiple-choice quizzes, each focusing on a separate topic. Discussing the answers brought out important technical information and improved communication skills.*

and outgoing on the job site than they were at a training meeting. At first, no one asked any questions or offered any comments. To grab their attention and overcome their shyness, we instituted the "Professor Sylvestre Quiz" — a series of multiple-choice tests on the monthly topic (Figure 2). We designed questions that would stimulate discussion and provoke new ideas. We used material from manufacturer's details and OSHA manuals, even from tool safety sheets. The tests were brief (about 15 questions) and fun to take, and were a good way to get the information across in a non-threatening way. We used the "answers" as a jumping-off point for a more in-depth discussion of the topic.



Hands-on practice. To focus on takeoffs and estimating, we also designed hands-on practice sessions. We took a plan for a typical 10x12 room addition, and asked all employees to do a material takeoff as best they could. Many of the crew were surprised at how long it took to do a takeoff, and how difficult it was to build a project on paper. The next month, we asked the employees to do the takeoff again and to include prices as well. Again, the follow-up discussion was lively, as crew members compared notes on the actual cost of 2x4s and plywood.

We repeated the estimating exercise three months in a row using the same floor plan each time. Everyone quickly improved both in accuracy and speed. In fact, the exercise worked much better than we had hoped. We were accomplishing several goals at once: teaching material takeoff and costing, educating employees about the price of waste, mistakes, and inefficiencies on site, and building communication skills.



Expert help. Estimating, scheduling, and site management skills were easy topics because we were already familiar with them. When we moved on to more abstract topics, however, we hired outside experts to come in and work with our group.

First, we hired a professor of rhetoric from the University of Minnesota who talks frequently to builders in the area about improving communication. The costs were reasonable — a $300 fee per visit, plus the cost to rent a room. We reduced this even further by sharing expenses with another company.

After two presentations on communications, we followed up with a speaker on management and customer relations. We chose a woman who was not familiar with the construction industry, but who had a good understanding of the issues involved, and who had experience with small groups.

Both consultants were effective, partly because they provided information beyond what I could supply on my own, and partly because they brought an outside perspective to bear on our familiar problems. They were also able to get their point across because they weren't "the boss." These outside experts commanded attention in a way I never could in an employer-employee relationship.

Formal training. We supplement our in-house training program by encouraging our employees to participate in Certified Remodeler classes offered by the local NARI chapter. The small study groups meet at lunchtime during the week, and we encourage all of our senior employees to participate. Employees attend on their own time, but we pay half the fee for the classes.

Our training program is still in its infancy, but already we can see positive results. Because our carpenters know more about what goes on behind the scenes, they can make better decisions on site. And several have shown an aptitude for management and administrative work that we might never have discovered without the training. Next time we add a lead carpenter, we won't need to place a help-wanted ad — we'll promote from within. ■

John Sylvestre is the owner of Sylvestre Construction, a design-build firm based in Minneapolis, Minn.