

Managing Client Emotions

by David Lupberger

Understanding their fears, building trust, and taking control are the secrets to managing homeowners as effectively as the job

As contractors, we spend most of our time on project management: estimating costs, lining up subcontractors, arranging materials, and scheduling the work. In the process, we often forget about the most important part of the job: managing the homeowner. If you've ever done a terrific job that was never appreciated, or if you've ever had a client start screaming at you for no apparent reason, then you already know that successful remodeling is only partly about doing quality work. Remodeling is also about making dreams happen. Frequently homeowners have nurtured their dreams for years before they work up the courage to remodel. It will be one of the most stressful experiences of their lives, and part of your job — perhaps the most important part — is to guide your clients through it.

The Emotional Roller Coaster

The strain of a remodeling project can turn

even the most reasonable of homeowners into manic-depressives. Their moods swing from excited expectancy when they begin sketching out rough plans to abject depression when they get the first estimates. When they see progress being made, they're up; when they get the first change order, they're down. Up and down they go on their emotional roller coaster till the job winds toward completion and their spirits slowly start returning to normal. But even if everything runs perfectly, once it's over, the best you may get from them is "It's beautiful, we love you — now get out of here."

These emotional highs and lows are the source of most of your problems with homeowners. But, if you're prepared to deal with them, you can turn those problems into opportunities to form tight, trusting relationships with your clients in a way nothing else can.

Facing down fear. What drives the emotional roller coaster? The answer is fear. For us contractors, it's just another job, one of hun-

dreds we've taken on over the course of our careers. But for the homeowners, it's all new and it's scary. It's going to cost them a lot of money to get what they want — frequently much more than they ever imagined — and their home is going to be invaded, their private lives disrupted. Plus, they're afraid it's not going to turn out the way they want.

On top of all that, they don't trust contractors, and with good reason: According to a 1988 Better Business Bureau report, only car dealers and auto repair shops had more consumer complaints filed against them than home improvement contractors. Times haven't changed that much since then. Nearly every homeowner can relate at least one horror story from a friend, a relative — or even themselves — about a remodeling job that went sour.

So what's the key to managing homeowners? Put yourself in their shoes and try to understand what they're going through and what it is they really want from you. Think about what brings you the most relief when fear besets you. It's having someone step in and say, "Don't worry. I'll take care of it." That's why we hire doctors, lawyers, and other professionals — because we trust them and we want them to handle it. That's why your clients hire you. They want to be taken care of, just like when they were kids. During stressful times, what they really want is for someone like Mom or Dad to throw their arms around them and say, "Don't worry, I'll take care of it. It's gonna be all right."

Be their parent. At the beginning of any good-sized job, a subtle transfer of authority takes place. You may not realize it, but if you are controlling the process, like any good contractor does, you're taking on the role of a parent to your clients. I'm not making this up: Psychologists call it "parental transference," and they tell me that your clients are subconsciously geared up for this before you even walk through the door.

Children need to know that their parents are always going to be there to take care of them. That's why children can be devastated if Mom or Dad is late picking them up from school.

It's the same thing with your clients. They desperately want to trust you. In their eyes, you have enormous power, because you're the person who will make their dreams happen. You are larger than life, so your clients give you unbelievable access to the guts of their daily lives. Only the family doctor knows more than a contractor about the intimate details of his or her clients' lives.

Be ready to seize the parenting role with both fists. Always remember that you are there to take care of them. Keep in mind, however, that good parents are loving, not dictatorial. When they're scared, reassure them. When a crisis erupts, do what good parents do to make their children's lives less stressful. Sure, they're going to have temper tantrums, but don't take it personally. That's parenting. The only thing you can't do is spank them.

Four Ways to Build Trust

From the very start, build trust by consciously and deliberately making promises and keeping them. If you understand and practice the four elements of trust — consistency, honesty, promise keeping, and reassurance — you'll never have any serious problems.

Consistency. If your child stays up too late or misses a meal, you know what happens: She cries, and she becomes moody and irritable. In a word, she gets emotional. Children need a consistent routine — dinner at six, bed time at eight. — to keep them happy and healthy.

Your clients crave consistency, too. Their worst nightmare is a pack of disorganized workers dragging in at all hours, spilling coffee and leaving muddy footprints on the oriental rugs.

From the first time you meet with potential clients, let them know that you have a consistent routine they can depend on. Show them your contracts, schedules, and change orders. Be specific in explaining your job procedures, then follow those procedures to the letter. If you agree that all work will begin at 8:00 a.m. and end at 4:30 p.m., stick to it. If you agree that the job site will be swept clean every day, see that it gets done.

On the flip side, make sure your clients understand what you expect from them. Don't fluctuate here, either. Hold them to their promises as tightly as you can. If they agree to remove all their dishes from the kitchen cabinets before demolition, don't let them off the hook by offering to do it for them. It may sound simplistic but, just like your children, they will respect you all the more for that kind of consistency.

Honesty. Being honest sometimes has a short-term downside but it always has a long-term upside. When you run into problems, face them quickly and squarely. If you discover you've left a cabinet out of a custom kitchen order and you know it's going to delay completion, the sooner you let your clients know, the better. Remember, 90% of your clients will respect an honest admission of responsibility; you probably don't want to deal with the other 10% anyway.

Also be sure to notify your clients well in advance when they should expect inconveniences. If the water has to be shut off temporarily, or if there's going to be a dust problem during demolition or drywall sanding, make sure it doesn't come as a surprise.

Promise keeping. Be on time for that first appointment no matter what. In fact, call to let your clients know you'll be there on time. That represents promise number one. From there on, follow up with little promises that you know you can keep: "Yes, I can have the estimate ready in ten days." Keeping those initial promises builds trust that will reap benefits for months to come.

Reassurance. Homeowners want desperately to believe that you're going to manage the job all the way through to the end. They want to know that you're not going to quit, you're not going to go broke, and you're not going to leave them hanging. In my experience, you can't tell a client often enough that everything's going to come out all right. It's music to their ears. Tell them as often as necessary: "It's going to be okay. I'm here to take care of you." (If the client is a linebacker for the Redskins, you might want to phrase this a little bit differently).

Clear Communication

When you listen to typical complaints about contractors, you'll notice that most are not about the actual construction. Complaints are usually about something that didn't happen, expectations that weren't met. In other words, communications weren't clear. We builders know how to build, but we're not always great communicators — especially when it comes to documenting things we've said and done.

The solution to this problem is to put detailed paperwork in your clients' hands. This eliminates most of the unknowns and uncertainties that will breed fear. Before the job starts, review the paperwork and procedures you explained at the initial visit. Make sure your clients understand and agree to everything at the outset.

Once the job is underway, I always put a job book on the site. It's just a notebook that gives my clients a place to leave comments for me when I'm not there. Besides improving communication, it also gives them a way to vent their frustrations without risking a face-to-face confrontation — and they can rip the page out if they change their minds.

There are always issues that need to be discussed in person, however, so schedule regular progress meetings as well. If your clients know they're

going to see you every Wednesday at 7:00 a.m., they'll be much more comfortable with the progress of the job. After each meeting, write up a summary of what was said. You can buy a carbonless memo pad from a stationery store and give them a copy of your notes before you leave. Or you can type up a short letter and send it to them afterwards. This simple summary will acknowledge what was agreed to and what is supposed to happen before the next meeting.

Dealing With Anger

Even with a consistent routine, children still get upset and throw tantrums from time to time. But, as a parent, you don't take it personally. You expect kids to be emotional. It's human nature.

Likewise with homeowners. Explosions are inevitable during a large remodeling job. When clients vent their frustrations at you, especially over something that wasn't your fault, you can't take it personally. If you become defensive or confrontational, your relationship will suffer. The homeowner will lose faith in you and you'll be convinced that you're saddled with the client from hell.

Instead of fighting back, step back. Separate yourself from the drama unfolding before your eyes and ears, and say to yourself: "These clients are going to be emotional at times. They are even going to be irrational at times." The emotional outburst usually blows over in a few minutes. As long as you stay focused on your parenting role and don't get emotionally involved, you'll gain points for maturity and control.

The Zen approach. It's difficult to predict what will trigger a homeowner explosion. It could be that after a terrible day at work, they arrived home to find that the roof that was supposed to be finished isn't done, or that something else that was supposed to happen, didn't. Suddenly, all the emotions of the day are transferred to you. You've been in their house for three months and they're getting tired of it. They just want to unload. They may call you a jerk, or worse, then reel off a laundry list of things that have been bugging them and building up since the beginning, most of which you've never heard before.

When people explode like this — and it'll happen with most homeowners — don't explain or defend a thing. Just listen. Because when someone is unloading like that, if you give them no resistance, they will quickly run out of steam. Let their anger pass over you like a wave, and soon it will be gone. If you don't counter with your own emotional defense, they'll feel embarrassed and you'll

look great. Usually, you'll end up with a heartfelt apology: "Look, I'm sorry, I've just had a bad day. I know it wasn't your fault."

After a calming-down period, let them off the hook. Tell them that you're not offended by their outburst, and that you empathize with their frustrations. Remind them that you're going to see the job through to completion, and assure them that there will come a time when they'll be glad they had this work done. The bond that forms during this kind of encounter will smooth your way in the future.

Crisis Management

Who defines a crisis? Your clients do. It doesn't matter what you think. It could be something as simple as you arriving twenty minutes late for an appointment. But it could be much more serious. Let's say you've been fixing a section of roof and an unexpected thunderstorm blows through at 2:00 a.m. The tarp blows off and water is everywhere. The homeowners don't care if you're asleep; they want you there now. (Never underestimate the power of a pager or cellular phone. Knowing you can be reached anytime, anywhere, really helps to calm your clients' fears.)

For homeowners, the immediate result of a crisis like this is that all of their fears suddenly seem justified: You're a rat, an incompetent bumbler who's destroyed their home. You're a thief, too, because all their money just went down the drain. That's what they're thinking and that's what you'll hear. Once their trust in you has been broken during a crisis, it's difficult to repair unless you go about it in exactly the right way


Deal with a crisis the same way you deal with anger: Let them vent. Offer no resistance or defense, and don't try to blame it on the subs. Stay cool, be the parent. When they start to simmer down, that's the time to provide reassur-

ance. Sincerely apologize for letting them down, tell them everything is going to be all right, and — here is the key point — find out what it will take to make it right with them. If the leak set back finishing the kitchen two weeks, you might ask: "Do I need to give you five dinners out?" or "Do I need to come in and cook for you?" One contractor I know, after he missed a deadline, came up with tickets to a Redskins game. The homeowner was still upset, but he couldn't believe he had those tickets in his hand (I know what you're thinking, but Redskins tickets used to be incredibly hard to get.)

In short, when a crisis happens, run toward it, not away. When you resolve a crisis effectively, your clients will then trust you like never before. It's a kind of bonding that often happens in a crisis. Even if the job finishes behind schedule and over budget, your clients will be delighted.

The Payoff

Remodeling brings out the best and the worst in people. If you learn how to control the emotional end of the process, you'll reap the benefits down the road. Not all of your clients will become family friends, but they will become a steady source of referrals for years to come.

But be patient. It will be two or three months after you've finished the job before your clients will start to feel really good about the money and the hassle. Then, one cool evening while sipping a glass of wine in the new room you built for them, they'll look out at the setting sun and say, "You know, I'm glad we did this." 

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