

Good Subs, Great Work

With clear communication and fair treatment, you can produce exceptional work with subs

As a construction superintendent for a commercial contractor who also builds custom homes, I have learned that the methods used to manage commercial projects can be equally effective in homebuilding and remodeling. Since we subcontract almost all our work on both residential and commercial proj-

by Greg Pringle

ects, I'll focus on subcontractor management, but much of this applies to employees as well.

My approach is simple, but not easy. Through careful contract administration, exacting scope-of-work descriptions, diligent site supervision, and above all, a cooperative attitude from the general contractor and all of the subcontractors, we get our jobs completed on schedule and with few things for anyone to complain about at the end of the job.

While this approach requires more of subs, more of myself, and more of the office staff, what we get in return is a product of exceptional quality in near-record time and a reasonable profit.

A Clear Scope of Work

A common problem for many builders is having to deal with unfinished or substandard work at the end of the job. This is usually the result of poor planning at the start of the job. If a task is not clearly spelled out in the scope of work, it's

going to end up on the punch list.

And if any job isn't spec'd in someone else's scope of work, you're going to end up doing it yourself. This is one of the main reasons why builders and remodelers end up pulling those "all-nighters" to get a job finished on time.


For everyone's benefit, take the time to write a comprehensive, detailed scope of work that leaves nothing to chance. Spell out exactly what the subs are and are not supposed to do, reference the correct drawing, and specify the completion date.

Three purposes are served by running a job this way. 1) If my subs know in advance that I won't accept substandard work and they are clear about the standard I've set, they are more likely to get it right the first time. 2) When I inspect their work, they already understand what my standards are when I ask them to correct any deficiencies. 3) Most importantly, if the scopes of work are clearly written and everybody has done their job in a timely fashion, there will be no punch list.

superintendent, the result is an enjoyable, productive place to work. My site plan includes staging, storage, and washout/cleanout areas. I pick up a broom daily. If the guys see me cleaning up the site, they tend to do the same.

Hold a Preconstruction Meeting

Before the job starts, we hold a preconstruction meeting to see if there's anything specific to this project that I could do to make the subcontractor's work faster and more efficient. I expect input from my subs at this point,

	
AVOID VERBAL ORDERS	
Date: 14/12/99	Project Name: Camino Subdivision
To: ABC Construction	SFBI Project No: 1234 Camino Calle
pls. be advised that upper cabinet blocking @ 1234 Camino Calle was installed 4" above the centerline height specified on page A-4 of your "for construction" drawings. Please send a carpenter by this address before 17/12/99 to fix this problem. Thank You	
Acknowledged By:	SF Brown, Inc By: Greg Pringle for SF Brown

This "AVO" (Avoid Verbal Orders) form is used by the author help to clarify scope-of-work details before they become punch-list problems.

Take Care of Your People

To get the quality of work from your crew or from your subs that leaves you a zero-item punch list, everyone from manual laborer to management has to go the extra mile. If subs want to come back for my next job, that extra mile is not optional. If I ask subs for that kind of commitment, it's reasonable for them to expect the same from me.

We pay on time, as per the contract, as long as the work meets the standards established in the scope of work. No exceptions, no excuses.

I learn the names of the people on my site, and I make sure they know that I appreciate their work, because I do.

I go out of my way to provide a clean, safe, well organized job site. If I am successful as a

such as a request from the electrician for help with lighting layout and placement of power feeds.

Before they begin work, each sub is provided with a copy of the complete schedule and a copy of the blueprints marked "for construction." I will annotate each set of prints if there are details or information specific to that subtrade.

Subcontractor input has (hopefully) helped to create the schedule prior to or during this preconstruction meeting, and subs know they will be held responsible for their part. This meeting is their best chance to express their concerns. After this point, I will not be very sympathetic to problems that weren't already addressed.

Maintain the Schedule

I provide adequate time for each sub-trade to do their work, and I try not to schedule subs on top of each other. When subs deviate from their own schedule, it is important to confine the delay to that particular phase of the project.

When a delay happens, I make sure that all of the subs involved understand what happened and why. While I am willing to apologize for the inconvenience, I also make sure they understand that I have a construction schedule that I will keep at all reasonable cost.

This means that if the plumbers had a week to do their job and they take two, they might be working around some very unhappy electricians during the second week. I use the same subs for almost every job, so they work together often. Once they understand the bigger picture, the situation tends to correct itself fairly quickly.

Provide Active Supervision

I often see general contractors attempt to cut job costs by putting the management burden on the subs, sometimes by simply not providing an on-site superintendent. This can be a disaster. Expecting a sub to recognize (or care) how his work fits into the larger project is unrealistic. A successful general contractor will recognize that profitable, efficient project management includes active site supervision.

One of my responsibilities is to provide subs with the information they need to do a good job. This can NOT be done from the office. You need to be the first one on your site and the last one to leave. Give your subs feedback on their work in progress and make sure that the work meets the standard. If it doesn't, give the sub a chance to correct it right away. Do this the same way every time. Both you and your subs will work more efficiently once a routine is established and followed.

Use Written Punch Lists

The punch list is a concise written list of defective, substandard, or incomplete work that the general contractor or project manager gives to the subs after substantial completion of their work, but before final payment at the end of their phase of a job. (This is different from

the "notice of work" that results from the owner walk-through inspection before closing.)

Like other communications, punch lists should be specific and always be in writing: Consider the difference between saying to your painter, "Paint in master bedroom unacceptable," and faxing him with "Please correct paint drip on north wall of master bedroom closet, upper right hand corner."

If you've supervised the project effectively from the start, punch lists should be short or nonexistent. This is not to say that even the most consummate craftsman won't miss something once in a while. Even my cabinet installer, who does amazing work, misses minuscule things now and then. If I don't catch it during installation with a casual, "Yo, Steve...," I write a punch list and fax it to my cabinet supplier: "Doors on 36-inch base cabinet to left of dishwasher, north wall kitchen at 1234 Camino Calle are not aligned correctly. Please have Steve drop by before the final cleaning crew on Tuesday." Steve will be there — problem solved.

Sometimes it is out of the sub's control — for example, if the plumber had to use an old toilet to pass his final inspection while waiting for a special-order item, the punch list might read, "Please replace the toilet in powder room with (model # and color) toilet ASAP. Thanks for using that clunker to pass the final."

Keep Lines of Communication Open

For subs who will not be back on your site once their scope of work is completed, especially for work which will be difficult to correct, like concrete, we often use a "running punch list." This communicates the corrections to be made while the work is still in progress, rather than waiting for completion of that phase.

With foundation work, for example, make sure you stay on top of the work as it progresses. Take a few minutes with a transit and a tape measure after the crew has gone home for the evening, or before they show up in the morning. Check the formwork; if it's not right, then give the sub enough time to fix the work before the concrete trucks show up.

Some GCs will say, "Hey that's not my job, that's what I'm paying the sub for." That may

be true, but once your slab or sub-floor is off, you'll have to deal with the unfavorable consequences for the rest of the job. And once the concrete is poured and the forms are stripped and loaded, you will never see those guys again unless you owe them money. Even if you do get them to come back, what do you expect them to do while your schedule is going down the drain? Better to invest the time up front to avoid the problem in the first place.

Use Financial Leverage Wisely

If everything is spelled out clearly in the scope of work, there are no surprises and no arguments in the middle of the job about what's included or excluded. Also, the subs understand that they will not be paid just because they think they're done, but "upon acceptance by the site superintendent."

Do subs resist this? Yes, there is an adjustment period at first. But once they've "bought into the program," they realize that this approach benefits everyone. Subs who are not able to recognize this don't have a place with our company.

Our contracts also specify that all subs have 10% of their fee held as retainage. We use retainage since subs may be off the site before a problem is identified and this helps motivate them to come back and complete their punch lists in a timely manner.

A one-time sub might pack an additional 10% into their bid to cover the retainage, so they don't care if they come back or not. If we hire someone like this, we structure the payments so that their final draw is fairly large (perhaps a third of the job) which is paid upon acceptance of work. I'll probably ask them to cut their bid by ten percent, too.

But all of my regular subs know the drill. They will get paid their retainage when I sign off on their scope of work — always have, always will. And we don't play favorites.

When Push Comes To Shove

What if, despite your best efforts at clear communications, a subcontractor does not follow the scope of work and refuses to cooperate? For example, what if your scope of work requires that the drywallers clean floors and electrical boxes, but they are getting ready to roll up leaving a mess?

You whip out a copy of the SIGNED scope of work and say, "I don't think so!" You are right; they are wrong. Let them make the decision by mentioning that your labor cost to mop the floor yourself is, oh ... \$65 per hour. This will get one of two results. Either they will get out of their trucks and take care of unfinished business or they will laugh at you as they drive away.

In case of the latter, sit down and count slowly to ten so your head doesn't explode. Then send a fax to the offending company that says the following: "Written notice is hereby given that you (the taping subcontractor) are in default of your contract. The job site at 1234 Camino Calle was left in an unacceptable state of dirtiness. In violation of your scope of work (enclosed), your crew left all/some/most (pick one) of the electrical boxes full of drywall mud. You have 24 hours to correct this problem or you will be charged \$65 per hour for the time it takes me to clean the drywall mud out of the electrical boxes. Thank you."

Do not cave into pressure from your subs like, "How about paying me at my final inspection?" You might have an electrician on site for a week after their final code inspection. However, a code official's inspection of a sub's work is not a measure of quality, but one of having met minimal standards. Inspectors do not check for nail pops, alignment of kitchen cabinet doors, or pinholes in the roof. Above all, they do not inspect to see if the sub has completed everything in their scope of work. If you don't have subcontractors that take pride in their work, and you don't catch items like these, you will be pulling that all-nighter!



Greg Pringle is a carpenter and superintendent for SF Brown, Inc. in Santa Fe, N.M.