

A Cohesive Tool Policy Boosts Productivity

by Paul Eldrenkamp

My company recently appointed a crew member as “tool czar” in an effort to lend cohesion and uniformity to our overall tool policy. This came about from working with my crews to replace the inconsistent policies that I periodically made up and then ignored at will. There was some frustration in the field over this flip-flopping, and I needed to address it before it became a bigger problem. I had to standardize my basic requirements and decide what I was going to offer in the way of tools and allowances.

My goal was to have my crews working with good-quality tools in top working order, as well as using proper safety equipment. It was also our shared philosophy that the lead carpenters should not be required to lend out their personal tools to apprentices. We needed to establish a common list of tools for both the apprentices and the leads.

Tool Categories

Through a series of conversations and meetings, we came up with three categories of tools and equipment (see “Tool Categories”).

Personal tools. The first category is personal tools, which each crew member is required to own and maintain (in the case of lead carpenters), or expected to acquire over time (in the case of apprentices).

These tools include hand tools (chisels, handsaws, wrenches, squares, levels, and so on), as well as power tools (circular saws, screw guns, cordless drills, belt sanders, sabre saws, and reciprocating saws).

It had been my practice for some time to pay for repairs and maintenance

Tool Categories

Personal Tools

Hand Tools

- Hammers
- Screwdrivers
- Chisels
- Hand saws
- Chalk line
- Stapler
- Utility knife
- Speed square
- Framing square
- 2-ft. & 4-ft. levels
- Nail sets
- Wrenches/socket set
- Tape measure
- Tin snips
- Flat bars
- Sawhorses
- Drywall square
- Combination square
- Putty knives
- Compounding tools
- Clamps

Power Tools

- Cordless saw
- Cordless drill
- Reciprocating saw
- Circular saw
- Palm & belt sanders
- Screw gun
- Jig saw
- 3/8-inch drill and bits

Crew Tools

- Chop saw
- Compressor
- Table saw
- Table saw stand
- Framing guns
- Finish guns
- Palm nailer
- Tarps and dropcloths
- Vacuum cleaner and accessories
- Brooms
- Trash barrels
- Foam gun
- Four-foot ladder
- Six-foot ladder
- Harnesses
- First aid kits
- Hard hats and eye protection

Shared Crew Tools

- Hand-held power plane
- Grinder
- Thickness planer
- 12-inch chop saw
- Hammer drill
- Powder-actuated nailer
- Biscuit joiner
- Wet saw
- Pneumatic stapler #1
- Pneumatic stapler #2
- Brad gun
- Orbital sander
- Roto zip
- Builder's level
- Eight-foot ladder
- Sixteen-foot ladder
- Twenty-eight-foot ladder
- Thirty-two-foot ladder
- Ladder jacks and planks
- Furniture dolly
- Come-alongs (2)
- Baker staging

whenever someone said that they needed something — no set budget figure, no cost control. We decided to change this non-policy into a monthly

allowance for the repair and replacement of the tools in this category. I now pay \$25 a month to each lead and \$15 a month to each apprentice for this pur-

pose, and they spend it as they see fit. It relieves the tedious burden of tracking small amounts of money and transfers the responsibility for tool care to the employees themselves. This policy does not include disposable items, such as blades and sanding belts, which I pay for separately and lump into an overhead category with other hard-to-quantify job costs. I monitor these from year to year to make sure they represent a consistent percentage of production costs.

Crew tools. The second category is crew tools. These are larger and more expensive items that the company owns and that are assigned to specific lead carpenters to use on their job sites. The lead carpenters, in turn, allow the apprentices to use them on an as-needed basis for work on that job site. This category includes compressors, nail guns, table saws, miter saws, and safety equipment, such as safety harnesses and first-aid kits. These are items that several people on the site share, as needed, thereby keeping the job site efficient and relatively uncluttered. I don't expect apprentices to own these tools personally, but they do need them to do their jobs.

By providing this category of tools, I am able to maintain control over the quality and accuracy of such things as tables saws and miter saws. And, because specific tools are assigned to specific lead

carpenters, we still foster a sense of personal responsibility and ownership regarding company-owned tools. Lead carpenters can have strong opinions regarding the proper use of tools, and this way they don't have to worry about how another lead might be using or abusing a cherished piece of equipment.

Shared crew tools. The third category of tools is made up of company-owned tools that aren't used daily, but are shared as needed. These include items like our thickness planer, tub saw, and hammer drills, which are more cost-effective to own than to rent. Often these tools end up staying on a job for a while or going home with a lead carpenter and staying there until someone else needs them. This works out fine with me, and we always know where they are when they're needed.

Custom-Fitting the Policy

In order to implement this plan, we had to make a few adjustments. For instance, some people already owned tools that fell into the "Crew Tools" category. To solve this problem, I bought these tools back from the leads, after having them assessed by a local tool dealer.

We also had the reverse situation, where some leads were using company-owned tools that they now needed to own personally. We worked it out so

they could buy these tools from the company using the monthly tool allowance.

The czar. Then I named one employee — an apprentice, not a lead carpenter — to oversee the new policies.

The tool czar now keeps track of where our tools are at a given moment and oversees tool maintenance and repair. He is also responsible for all tool research: reading magazines, going to trade shows, and asking various subcontractors and suppliers what they prefer.

He has ultimate say regarding what we buy and when, holding the reins to the \$2,000 annual maintenance and acquisition budget we have established for company-owned tools. This amount is independent of the monthly individual tool allowance, bringing our total annual allowance to \$3,300. (As a benchmark for this budget, we have three lead carpenters and do \$1.5 million a year.)

My crew seems happy with this clear and (hopefully) generous tool policy. It also seems to have given productivity a boost. What's more, the lead carpenters are gradually learning that the tool czar is the one to butter up when they want to add their selection to the tool collection. All I have to do is establish the line item and the crew takes it from there. 

Paul Eldrenkamp owns Byggmeister, a remodeling company in Newton, Mass.