

Training Your Own Replacement

by Rick Stacy

Years ago, I attended a business management course where the instructor hit us with this advice: "Whatever your job, whatever your position, always be training your own replacement." That sounded crazy to me — why make yourself expendable? Why put your job security at risk? But, as I thought about it, the concept began to make sense. And, in fact, training employees to be more qualified and independent has freed me up to attend to matters that demand greater expertise and experience.

A Change in Attitude

One of the things we general contractors complain about the most is our employees: We can't find anyone good or, if we do, we can't hang on to them. And the good ones often go out on their own. This is where the "training your own replacement" strategy comes in. While many contractors begrudge the loss of a good employee who starts his own business, I've found that there are clear benefits to actually encouraging your employees, from day one, toward the ultimate goal of being self-employed. While this is technically not training someone to take your place, it's the same concept. You're training them to do your job, that is, to run a business of their own.

I search for and recruit employees whom I plan to mentor for at least four to five years. When they are ready, I send them into business on their own. I know you're asking, "What could the benefits possibly be?" But this concept has revolutionized my hiring strategy and completely changed my attitude

toward my employees. And it works. Take, for instance, this ad I recently ran:

HELP WANTED: Carpenter's Helper — Looking for responsible, conscientious, independent worker. Great opportunity for someone interested in learning all aspects of residential remodeling. Thinking of running your own business someday? Here is a chance to gain the skills, experience, and business knowledge to do it.

Those who responded to my ad were very interested in the "starting your own business" part of the ad. After some screening and interviews, I landed a great employee who is capable and eager to learn the trade.

A great incentive. Let's face it, builders or remodelers with smaller businesses don't have a lot of upward mobility or benefits to offer new employees. Providing the opportunity and training to help someone on their way to starting their own business is a way to tell a potential employee, "I have something to offer that you probably won't find in a larger company." It's a great incentive and will increase the caliber and motivation of hires that come your way.

I not only offer to teach them the skills to run their own business, but when they're ready, I'll help launch them into business, provide them with some work, and set them up with customers of their own.

What's In It for Me

I've found many benefits of this approach to training employees:

- An employee who sets his sights on running his own business will be more motivated and attentive, and therefore more productive.
- The business-minded employee's expertise will grow faster than a traditional employee's, freeing you up for other aspects of running the business.
- When the employee finally launches out on her own, she will need work. You now have a reliable subcontractor, trained in your ways, whose areas of expertise you're familiar with.
- Once he's on his own, you have someone to whom you can refer jobs that you can't or don't want to take on. A young remodeler just starting out is typically hungry for all comers. You can refer him with confidence.
- Once trained, the employee may be content to stay with you. Or you may find her too valuable to lose and can offer further incentives for her to stay on as an employee. In this case, you've lost nothing by training her and now have a lead carpenter who is capable of running jobs on her own.

By applying the "train your own replacement" method, you end up with employees who think and act more like a business owner. They're motivated to get the work done, not merely biding their time until five o'clock rolls around.

The Piggyback Method

I know that this strategy works, because it's how I got started in business. After being trained and mentored for a few years, my boss's work slowed for a period and he saw fit to "kick me out of the nest."

"Have some cards printed up and get

your own DBA [Doing Business As]," he said. "I'll send what work I can your way." And so he did. During my first year in business, 80% of my work was subcontracted through him. In addition, he referred me to several customers of my own. I refer to this as the piggyback method of getting started in business.

From employee to subcontractor. After five years on my own, I was completely weaned from my former employer and was generating all of my own work. During that five-year period, I was available to him as a regular and reliable sub, yet he was under no obligation to keep me busy. Not a bad investment for him. In fact, in the years that followed, I was even able to return some of the favor by sending work his way when he needed it.

My goal is to get a total of eight to ten

years of help from a hire (four to five years as an employee and four to five years as a subcontractor). That's not bad, considering how long you may normally expect to hang on to an employee in construction.

Some contractors may fear losing customers or work to their former employee-turned-independent, but I believe this fear is unfounded. A good business that serves its clients well will not lack for work and customers.

Your Replacement's Replacement

When the time comes for your employee to go out on their own, or on to something else, you'll need to start training his replacement. It's a cycle. Ideally, you start to train the new replacement before the former one disappears.

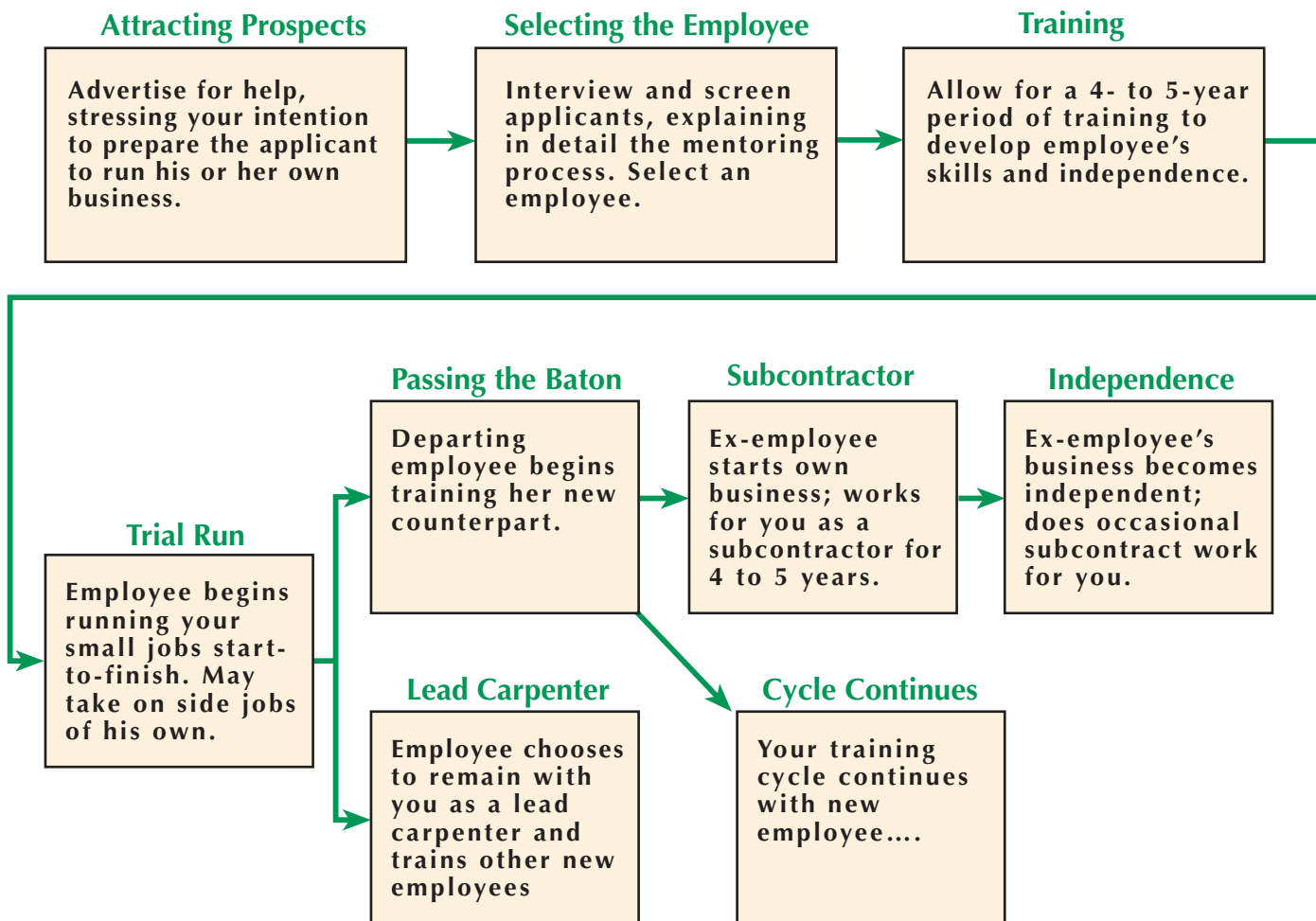
Trained trainers. Here's another way

to apply the "train your own replacement" mentality: The outgoing employee can help to train his or her replacement. I've found that my employees are generally much better at breaking in a new employee than I am. I believe there are several reasons for this. First, they tend to be closer to the process than I am and, in general, are more patient. They're also more willing to take the time to explain things and are less likely to miss things I might take for granted. This becomes one of the last services your employee offers before heading out on his or her own — a sort of passing of the baton.

Mentoring Tips

Training your own replacement does require a commitment, but shouldn't cost you much more time than you would normally devote to training an

Steps to Training Your Own Replacement



employee. Here are some suggestions:

- Take the time to walk through a skill with her. Explain tasks as you're doing them. Explain some of the wrong ways to do it and lessons you've learned from past mistakes. Let her draw on your hard-won experience.
- If you're working on something he may benefit from, call him off his task to watch. (The other day, I was installing a new circuit breaker and pulled my helper off sanding drywall to hold the flashlight while I talked through what I was doing. It broke the monotony of his task, prepped him for future electrical work, and cost me less than 15 minutes of time.)
- Discuss upcoming jobs with your employee so he feels like he's a vital part of the business.
- Teach employees financial skills as they come up during the course of a job. For instance, a customer requested an extra on a deck we were building. I included my helper in an on-the-spot calculation of the charge for the change order. This got my

employee thinking about time and money issues critical to the success of the business.

- Offer incentives or bonuses if a job is completed ahead of schedule. I sometimes let my employee know how much time I have figured for a particular job, or aspect of a job, and encourage him to gauge his work accordingly. If I've calculated a 10-hour job and he completes it in 8, I'll tell him to record 10 hours on his time card. This encourages an employee to think in terms of budgeting his time.
- Take your employee along on an estimate, or work up an estimate with him over lunch. Lunchtime is a great time to discuss details of a job or explain the decisions you've made about the work in progress.
- Hash over an upcoming problem and ask for his or her thoughts on a solution. This gets the employee thinking as a contractor rather than as a helper.
- As the employee becomes more capable, leave her alone as often as possible in order to create circumstances where

she's forced to stand on her own and resolve problems that arise.

Win-Win

Not all employees have the desire or capability to go it on their own. The beauty of this system is that the preparatory process still makes a helper a better employee and benefits your company. And, it keeps fresh faces coming into the business. Believe me, I've changed my way of doing things many times at the suggestion of an "inexperienced" helper. Sometimes we get stuck in a rut, and a fresh perspective is a welcome relief.

Finally, a great deal of satisfaction comes from passing your hard-won knowledge on and helping someone else to succeed. I've been blessed with good mentors, and that's a tradition I want to continue. 

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