

When the Office Resists Change

Thinking like business people. It's one of the biggest challenges for a lot of construction-business owners, especially if they have been used to thinking like carpenters for most of their careers. Almost every time I guide this transition, I encounter resistance. It's not easy to change the way we approach the world.

Sometimes, however, the resistance to change is coming not just from the business owner who is stuck thinking like a carpenter, but also from the contractor's support team. Anyone involved in the construction process can get stuck in his or her way of thinking, which is rooted in experience that often has nothing to do with how small residential construction companies are run.

A recent meeting with an owner and his staff uncovered this wrinkle. In this instance, it was strong and vocal resistance from the bookkeeper.

All too often, bookkeepers are held responsible for setting up financial software and procedures for entering data. But very few have a background in construction accounting, or have a complete understanding of estimating and job costing, or even mastery of the software. As a result, they're set up for failure from the very beginning. As with owners, bookkeepers can face the prospect of improvement (read "change") with emotions ranging from grateful relief to defiant resistance.

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To help foster understanding, I set up a first meeting with the contractor and his office staff, and that's when we encountered the resistance. Afterward, my client expressed his dismay: "I don't understand. Why would anybody not want to improve, especially when they are getting paid while they're being trained?"

The following are the factors, drawn from my experience with this transition, that most often contribute to the staff's

reluctance to consider suggestions for improvements:

- Office staff are often afraid that changes will compromise the value of the company's accounting files and are protective of the owner's need to have accurate information.
- Staffers often have developed methods of doing things that are idiosyncratic rather than strategic. Because what they've set up is based on their preferences rather than on strategy or logic, their special knowledge is required in order to make sense of data. This can be a form of job protection.
- The staffers may enjoy being the information provider. Easy access to simplified reports threatens their role of gatekeeper and controller. These folks may wish to retain power and prestige.
- Staffers may lack competency with the software and clarity regarding the owner's objectives. (Note: It is rare indeed that owners are able to identify and clearly convey their requirements to their office staff, who may be forgiven for failing to produce what hasn't been defined.) These individuals are scared of change because it will mean giving up familiar habits they have developed, the results of which are at least predictable (even though they are also often inaccurate or irrelevant).

If staffers have the company's best interests at heart, they will eventually buy into improvements and find new ways to bring efficiency and accuracy to the job. In many cases, they will even find enhanced satisfaction through being able to deliver the reports sought by the owner. If the resistance continues, then it's time to consider whether or not that person is capable of becoming an enthusiastic team player. If they can, their value to the company increases. If they can't, their continued presence and negativity will likely become an impediment to morale—and to the business.

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