

BY MELANIE HODGDON

Building a Team for Growth

Some complaints about the lack of qualified carpenters are justified. If you are having trouble finding good help, you may need to create it yourself. Let's look at the approaches of two contractors who have decided to add to their production workforce.

THE PLAYERS

Doug Doitt has come up through the ranks, after starting out working with his dad. Doug has excellent skills and prides himself on his skills as a planner and as a carpenter, as well as on his ability to find creative solutions for sticky situations.

Tim Trainer worked construction in the summers during school. He enjoys the challenge and satisfaction of creating something beautiful and enduring and has decided to start a remodeling company. His carpentry skills are average, and he prides himself on his commitment to a sustainable business, his skills as a teacher, and his ability to build an autonomous team.

Newt Newbie is a new hire. He's loyal and willing but has few carpentry skills. He shows up on time, puts in a good day's work, and is curious about the building process. Let's examine how Doug and Tim might interact with Newt on a simple one-story addition project.

Doug and Newt. Doug starts the layout. He demonstrates how to mark out stud locations 16 inches on-center, tells Newt to keep going around the perimeter, and then leaves. Newt dutifully continues marking 16-inch intervals, hits a corner 7 inches from the last stud on one side, and marks the next location 9 inches from the corner. When he finishes, he lets Doug know. Doug instantly sees what Newt did, shakes his head in disgust, mutters a few less-than-complimentary remarks, and re-does it himself.

Tim and Newt. Tim explains to Newt that stud layout is critical and you need to think backwards from the finished product. The intervals have to work for the sheathing, standard insulation batts (if used), and the drywall. He then tells Newt that although there are a couple of standard intervals, on this job the studs will be laid out 16 inches on-center. Tim starts the layout and after demonstrating two or three marks, asks Newt if he has questions. Newt thinks it looks straightforward and agrees to finish up the layout. Tim then asks Newt to speculate on how he should handle the corners. Tim

helps Newt devise a plan for the entire layout and hangs around to observe and reinforce Newt's first marks. When Newt is finished, Tim reviews the work and compliments Newt for creating a correct layout.

Newt's reaction to Doug. Doug hasn't helped Newt understand the reasons behind the layout, didn't challenge Newt to come up with a solution for the corners, and failed to give Newt the opportunity to correct his errors. Even if Newt doesn't make the exact same mistake again, he hasn't grown as a planner and hasn't been introduced to the idea that workers coming after him will depend on his work to perform their work. In addition, he has learned that Doug holds all the knowledge and that his expertise is required for the project to be produced correctly.

Newt's reaction to Tim. Tim has engineered a positive experience. Newt has learned how to mark a simple layout, but more importantly, he's been introduced to the concept that the project is a team effort, and the work of every individual must integrate with the work of others. Newt feels competent and is eager to learn more. He has learned that Tim encourages questions and supports Newt's attempts to find solutions. The stage is set for him to become a valuable contributor to the team.

THE ENDGAME

The point, in this highly simplified example, is that the owner—not the hire—will determine whether or not a self-sufficient team is created. Doug is focused on controlling the process. He holds the important information, he makes the decisions, and he is ultimately personally responsible for the work performed. He attempts to impart specific skills without providing context. Tim understands that a valuable employee thinks ahead and makes decisions that reflect his understanding of how the next piece of the puzzle will interact with what he's doing now. Therefore his emphasis is on introducing skills within the context of the entire project and on fostering planning and problem-solving.

So ask yourself, where will Newt's level of skill and value be after a year of working for Doug compared with a year of working for Tim?

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