

BY IAN SCHWANDT

Transitioning to Hybrid Production Management

During its life cycle, a residential remodeling company faces several moments when it must change if it is to grow and stay profitable. The most obvious moment is when a company founder recognizes they can no longer keep up with the needs of the business while also working in the field. This is when they trade in their toolbelt for sales training and spreadsheets.

The lead carpenter system was born out of the baby boomer generation as it aged into prime earning years. Company founders faced this transition by coaching their high-performing employees to run projects with their toolbelts on, just as they had done, and the resulting lead carpenter system has proven to be a more scalable alternative to a founder leading one or two project crews at once. However, as project size and complexity increase, some companies are beginning to shift toward a project manager-based system or a hybrid system with both lead carpenters and project managers, in hopes of maintaining scalability and profitability.

TDS Custom Construction, where I am the production manager, began the shift to a hybrid lead-carpenter and project-manager system about two years ago, and we see our ability to create project teams with both lead carpenters and project managers as vital to executing a higher number of complex projects each year. We moved in this direction in reaction to ever-increasing administrative requirements during the contract and preconstruction phases. Pulling lead carpenters out of the field or having upper management execute administrative and planning tasks did not prove to be as scalable as adding a layer of project managers to the team.

HOW IT WORKS

Our project teams—made up of in-house design staff, project managers, lead carpenters, and our production coordinator—form after the design team signs off on the schematic design. Each team member has a repeatable set of responsibilities; using JobTread construction management software, we track these and create a project package for the lead carpenter.

The project manager is the first production team member to get involved while a project is still in the design phase. They conduct site walk-throughs, take the lead in developing trade-partner and vendor scopes of work, and solicit pricing for the subcontracted portions of the project. This early involvement gives the project manager time to develop a deep understanding of the project goals, the client, and the design intent, which in turn provides a strong foundation for carrying the project from design through to completion with the lead carpenter.

Post contract, the project manager teams up with our production coordinator to “buy out” the project by issuing purchase orders

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to the selected vendors and trade partners with whom the project manager worked during the design phase.

The production coordinator sets up the project in JobTread by building the baseline schedule, uploading important project documents, ordering items with long lead times, and setting up the budget for job costing. During this preconstruction phase, the project manager focuses on building a field team that meets the needs of the project and prepping the client and their home for the work ahead. The lead carpenter typically gets their first look at the drawings and specs of the project during this phase by attending meetings with the project manager and the design team.

Armed with an understanding of the design intent and the project goals, the lead carpenter works with the project manager to source non-purchase-order materials and set up the site requirements—dumpsters, construction toilets, and rented equipment—for the project start. During the build phase, the lead carpenter directs all work on the site, schedules deliveries and trade partners, orders materials, and manages the client’s day-to-day needs. Project managers focus on job costing and managing the overall schedule using JobTread, in addition to leading a weekly meeting with the client. Our project managers also participate in weekly tactical planning meetings at our office where I work with them to build three-week and quarterly look-aheads to manage our labor pool and the start-date expectations of future clients.

This division of labor enables our project managers to serve as the bridge between the office-based employees and the field-based build team, while maximizing the number of projects that our teams can run concurrently. Each project manager handles four to six remodeling projects at once, depending on job size, and each lead carpenter runs the sites for one to three projects, based on their level of experience. Like the move to the lead carpenter system before it, the transition to a hybrid or project-manager-based system is an important step in the evolution of remodeling companies aimed at increased profitability and efficiency.

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What Is Leadership?

They say there are no stupid questions, but “What is a leader?” may qualify. Still, not having a great answer to that question for most of my adult life was the most significant impediment I faced in embracing the idea of being a leader.

When I was young, I was a Boy Scout. Though people say that scouting is a good way to learn leadership skills, I was mostly in it to get out of the house. Most of what I understood to be leadership fell on the shoulders of the adults in our troop: “Set up your tent.” “Go to sleep.” “Stop throwing that!” During my college years, I took outdoorsy summer jobs that also purported to build leadership skills. Again, it didn’t seem that there was a lot to this leadership thing. Make a menu, organize some outdoorsy work, and tell other outdoorsy kids where to set up their tents and who is cooking dinner and breakfast. I could do all of that, but did that make me a leader?

Years later, after learning construction, co-founding a remodeling business, and hearing about leadership this and that, I was suffering from a mild yet persistent case of what we now call impostor syndrome—the fear of being discovered as a fraud. As a business owner, I was supposed to be good at leadership, but what was leadership?

Leaders are loud, leaders are born. Leaders have been through Navy Seals BUD/S training. Leaders have a particular DISC profile, Kolbe A Index, Myers-Briggs profile, or Dungeons & Dragons character and alignment (Chaotic Neutral Druid here). I’ve never been the square-jawed, loud person who walks in and dominates a room. Natural-born leaders can be heard outside over the din of battle. I’m quiet and avoid loud noises. When I try to shout over noise, my voice cracks like a 13-year-old’s—not the same impact as, say, someone like Jocko Willink, the exemplary square-jawed author of *Extreme Ownership: How U.S. Navy Seals Lead and Win*. Not identifying with any of those leadership models contributed to my impostor syndrome; as far as I could tell, I didn’t have the stuff that leaders have.

Clearly, that changed. Several years ago, I got involved with a group of guys who were mostly exercising together and goofing off in the early hours of the morning as part of a loosely organized national group called F3. Its stated mission is to “plant, grow, and serve small men’s workout groups for the invigoration of male community leadership.” I was all-in on the exercise, and meeting some new guys sounded great. The idea of discussing and practicing leadership was intriguing. I didn’t know how jumping jacks, burpees, and push-ups at 5:30 a.m. would contribute to my growth as a leader, but as a lifelong leadership impostor looking for answers, I decided to attend the group’s weekly evening leadership discussions. At one of the initial meetings, a definition of leadership was offered: A leader is a person who influences the movement of a group toward a position of advantage.

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Oh. That’s it? All this time, and the answer is that simple. So, when I told those outdoorsy kids to set up the tents over there because they wouldn’t flood if it rained, I was being a leader? And I did that without having graduated from West Point? This was a light-bulb moment. Not only did the concept of leadership suddenly become more relatable, but I also realized that the reason it hadn’t been was that I didn’t have a definition of leadership. With that simple, single-sentence definition, I knew that leadership was not only something that I could do but also something that I had been doing for much of my life.

Of course, owning and managing a business presents more complex challenges than siting tents, and the position of advantage that we need to move toward is not always clear, but the fundamentals are similar. A leader needs to have the vision to see the position of advantage and clearly articulate how to get there. And a leader needs to embrace the fact that movement will cause disruption of the status quo. Seeing the good spot for the tents, telling people where to set them up, and understanding the extra effort it might take is easier than, say, restructuring the roles and responsibilities of the members of your production department, but here is the fantastic other thing I realized about leadership after learning this definition: Anyone can practice the required skills and get better at them. The notion of a “born leader” is baloney. Some people might be born with a square jaw and a loud voice, but nobody is born a leader.

In the exercise group, everyone shares in leading workouts. Every week, anyone can plan a workout and lead a small group for an hour. It’s good practice in a safe space where failure will not cost anyone anything. Similarly, there are plenty of other low-pressure opportunities for anyone to practice leadership by moving any group they are associated with to a position of advantage. Planning a family vacation with my wife is an opportunity to practice leadership. So is planning with friends to go camping or meet up for a mountain bike ride. Grocery shopping with my kids might be the most challenging leadership practice. Understanding what leadership is helps me find opportunities to practice and continually polish leadership skills for more significant tasks; without a good definition and lots of practice, I would still be floundering as a leadership impostor.

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