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Myles Corcoran: Asking tough questions will pay off

Imagine a construction project where change orders exceed all reason, the work is done incorrectly, the scheduled completion date is long bygone, lawyers have not only been engaged, but have started to call each other names and the project is still months from completion.

And all anyone wanted was to earn a fair living and produce a well-built structure for a happy client. Let's say a general contractor has a cabinetry subcontractor with whom he has worked successfully for many years. The subcontractor arrives with the custom walnut kitchen cabinets. The Sheetrock hasn't been installed yet; three weeks earlier, framing change orders threw the job off schedule by a week. The cabinet subcontractor has lined up other work for the next four weeks, assuming he'd have these walnut cabinets installed in two days and could move on to his next contracts. He says he can only install this week or not until next month.

The general contractor says the kitchen won't be ready until next week, just like the revised job schedule said. He trusted the subcontractor would come by the site and see how the posted schedule had changed and make arrangements accordingly. The subcontractor replies that he's delivering the units exactly on time per his contract and he scheduled accordingly. He trusted the general contractor would call if there were a schedule change. One set of hands is in the air; the other pair is gesturing at the posted job schedule. Trust led both parties to this disaster.

Where does all this trust lead us? To delays, unanticipated costs, disputes of all kinds, poor work product and emotions most of us would rather avoid — anger, sadness, betrayal and feeling the need to defend and blame. And all of this happens between people who should be working well together, at least professionally. So what's the answer?

When I see one or more key players in a building team of owners, designers and contractors systematically studying the project needs and monitoring ongoing activities and schedules, the odds are better that the project will be successful for all of the team. This quality assurance can be expensive and difficult in many ways, yet well worth it.

An owner who starts a project should inquire about the basis of everything the designers and builders say and produce. If the owner isn't qualified for this role, he or she can hire a quality assurance inspector. Designers need to question their own plans and assumptions at every step. The builder or a quality assurance inspector needs to grill every aspect of the design and the assumptions of every subcontractor and supervisor. Each must be able to take the authority and control, when

necessary, to make a hard decision that may cost you or someone else money, prestige or both. If professional questioning and quality assurance are so needed, why are they so rare?

I think it is mostly due to our trusting that everything is OK and our reluctance to question someone we work with. We do not appreciate being questioned ourselves, and we especially don't like to be told we did something wrong or left something out.

For projects to succeed, we need to work together. People who work well together do not blindly trust each other. So how do we keep from damaging relationships when we ask questions?

For me, it all comes down to integrity. If your motivation is to have a successful project and you are willing to put in the energy required, the people whose work you must question will recognize your integrity and respect you. Questioning actually avoids the confrontation. When you call or write a subcontractor to confirm an expectation or discuss a change in plans and your motivation is about creating a successful project, that subcontractor will understand: it is not about them, it is about the project's success. Deliver the request, question or even demand in a professionally concerned way. So get on the phone, set up the meetings, ask questions and let everyone know your expectations. Be proactive, stay alert and, in the end, I trust your project will be a winner for everyone involved.

Myles F. Corcoran is CEO of Myles F. Corcoran Construction Consulting Inc., founded in Santa Cruz in 1990. He is a licensed general contractor and certified building inspector with 26 years of construction experience. He also is certified as an arbitrator for the Contractors State License Board.

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