

When Trust Is Bad

A Superintendent for a large high quality builder told me recently that he figures there are three factors in construction projects: Quality, Schedule, and Cost, and that the owners can pick two. There are many reasons this can be said to be true. However, I believe that owners can have all three and that builders can make a profit at the same time. In fact, I only think of a project as being wholly successful if it meets all three of these criteria: the designers and builders make a profit and enhance their reputations and the owner gets a quality project at a fair price, completed on a timely basis.

As a General Contractor and Construction Consultant with over 26 years of working with owners and builders, often assessing and repairing “failures” in one or all of the three key factors mentioned above, I can't say, “I have seen it all”, but I have seen quite a bit with respect to project failures.

In this article I will discuss what I see as possibly the most pervasive reason so many projects suffer in quality, timing, and/or staying in budget: I want to discuss the pitfalls of trust.

Imagine a construction project where the change orders exceed all reason; the work is done incorrectly; the scheduled completion date is long bygone; the lawyers have not only been engaged, but have started to call each other names; and, the project is still months away from completion! A nightmare? Maybe some of you out there have been wide awake when you experienced some, if not all, of these troubles – and wished you were sleeping so you could wake up! And all anyone wanted was to earn a fair living, make a little profit and produce a well built structure on time for a happy client!

We've all had one or more adult guides in early childhood. For most of us, it was our parents, who told us, in no uncertain terms, to beware of strangers. We all know that people can be deceptive. But what about the highly recommended owners or builders, the familiar faces, the oft-used subcontractors or suppliers who have always come through before?

Let's say that a general contractor has a cabinetry subcontractor with whom he has worked successfully for many years on many projects. The subcontractor arrives on site 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 says the kitchen won't be ready until next week, just like the revised job schedule said. The general *trusted* that the subcontractor would have come by the site and see the posted schedule, how it 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* that if there was a schedule change that affected him the general would have called. One

set of hands is in the air, the other pair is emphatically gesturing at the revised, posted job schedule. *Trust* led both parties to this “disaster.” Even if this turned out to be a “minor” problem in itself, it can magnify into a project debilitating, relationship ruining, time wasting “money sump.”

Owners, designers, contractors and subcontractors are often “burned” when they *trust* the plans and specifications. This happens as often as the sun comes up. Lets try another example: an owner *trusts* that everything needed to heat the building was in the contractor’s scope. The designer *trusts* that the builders will figure out how to install a heating system without clear layout and details being shown on the permit plans. The HVAC subcontractor *trusts* this will be a “typical” install, even though the plans are sketchy, and bids the project accordingly. The general likes this HVAC price and *trusts* that the subcontractor has included all the essentials. The framing subcontractor erects the steel framing per plan, leaving no room for heat ducts, *trusting* that the HVAC system is electric baseboards instead of forced air. Everyone involved ends up suffering.

And where does all this trust lead us? To delays, unanticipated costs, disputes of all kinds, poor work product, and all of those emotions most of us would prefer to avoid like anger, sadness, feelings of betrayal, and feeling the need to defend and blame. And all of this happens between people who really should be working, if not happily, at least professionally, together.

With so many opportunities for trust to cause us problems; where can one look for an answer? It has been my experience that when I see one or more of the key players in a building team of owners, designers, and contractors perform “Quality Assurance,” that is, someone who systematically studies the project needs and monitors the ongoing activities and schedules, the probability is greatly increased that the project will be successful for all members of the building team. This “Quality Assurance” can be expensive and difficult in many ways, and well worth it in the long run.

An owner who starts a project in motion, should be very inquisitive as to the basis of everything the designers and builders are saying and producing. The designers need to be pro-actively questioning their own plans and assumptions at every step and the builders need to “grill” every aspect of the design and the assumptions of every sub contractor and supervisor that will contribute to the building. I am talking here about a lot of “professional” questioning. Then 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 and/or prestige.

If “professional” questioning and “quality assurance” is so needed, why is it so rare? I think it is mostly due to our *trusting* that everything is O.K. and our discomfort questioning or doubting someone we work with. People do not usually appreciate being questioned and we especially don’t like being told that 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. Owners, financiers, designers, and builders all require some trust in each other. That trust needs to be well informed

and limited in what it allows the others to do without careful oversight.

So when we do not trust, because we want to have a successful project, how do we keep from damaging the relationship we have with the others we are working with when we question them? When questioning feels like pestering or even confrontation with people you really need to work with, we can come up with lots of compelling reasons to not question. How do we check up on them without them feeling disrespected?

For me it all comes down to integrity; a word many of us may associate with trust. If your motivation is to have a successful project, along the lines of how I define success above, and you are willing to put in the required energy, the people whose work you must question will recognize the integrity in your motive and respect you for it. It appears to me that nearly every one of us would like to be part of something acknowledged for excellence, such as a building can be. I believe that when any key player focuses intently and with integrity on having a successful construction project, the other key players will see an opportunity, not a challenge. Questioning, of a certain kind, 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 purely about creating a successful project, that subcontractor will understand: it is not about them, it is about the project's success and that means their success. And we can deliver the request, question or even demand in a professionally concerned way that does not see that subcontractor as a hindrance to success but an integral part of it.

In short: questioning, advising and expecting, done with integrity, is usually well received and well mannered.

Having seen the results of allowing for trust alone to bring a project to a successful completion I conclude that it is bad to trust - unless you are *very lucky*. I have heard it said that the road to hell is paved with good intentions – and I would add that the sub-grade is a blend of compacted trust.

So get on the phone, set up the meetings, ask the questions and let everyone know what you think the expectations are. Be proactive about how you build, be careful, stay alert and then, in the end, I trust that your project will be a winner for everyone involved.

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