

A Subcontractor's Perspective on Effective Project Management

When things go right on a construction project we get it done on time, safely, with a reasonable profit, and have a happy Owner. Think about how many different people, businesses, and individual events a construction project involves? To furnish a light fixture, for example, there needs to be a prime contract, a subcontract, and two lower tier purchase orders, one with the distributor and one with the manufacturer. With so many things that need to happen correctly, it is a wonder that more things don't go wrong. It is proper management that makes things go right.

A perfect construction project would not be without change orders but with well managed changes. A perfect project does not have to be without differing site conditions, but we have to find them and get them resolved timely. The construction documents don't have to be flawless but we have to quickly work out the discrepancies with the designers. A perfect job would not be without problems to solve, but with only current problems in the process of being solved.

A perfect project does need perfect management. Management begins at a project's hectic onset. Why are there are so many documents? What do you mean we don't have a superintendent available yet? I need the early start subs right now! How many security hoops do I have to jump through to get into this site? The duration is only 300 days; but it will take that long to get the switchgear! I don't understand the phasing. The specifications have too many idiotic requirements! I don't have time for this and my other project!

Stop complaining and start managing.

Study the drawings, each and every sheet, take notes. Read every page of the RFP, prime contract, and specs. Do a spread sheet of every deliverable, and its due date. List all the trades and the order you want them procured. Build the job in your head. That is just the first day's tasks. On day two learn the details.

You are successfully managing the project when you know the project better than anyone else, you are planning ahead to prevent problems, and you can put out fires when they are mere smoke not blazes. Don't fall

behind for a minute. Do your meetings and calls during the day, then your submittals and cost proposals at nights and weekends. This positions you to be a leader, and a critical resource for the project's supervision. If you have the feeling that the project is managing you instead of you managing the project then you are not doing enough. Your mantra must be to keep current.

When you are ahead of the management curve you then create opportunities to look for problems before problems find you. When you know the drawings, have checked the submittals, prepared the schedule, read all the subcontracts, priced the changes, and kept up the logs you have the knowledge that no one else has. Use that knowledge for problem prevention, creative solutions, and long-range planning.

Demand quality and timeliness from your subs, other departments such as purchasing, and your project executive. Manage each of those entities with equal effort until they have done their jobs.

In yours, and the Owner's eyes, the buck stops with you. If the project suffers a serious problem or a delay because a subcontractor or supplier failed to perform then you take the blame because you are in charge. Don't tell the Owner that it is the mechanical contractor's fault the chiller is late – tell them you are managing the problem with the chiller.

The quickest way to look like a fool is to blindly take what you are given and pass it on to the next person. You must "filter and validate" every verbal statement, written RFI, request for proposal, change order proposal, submittal, etc. About 25% of the RFI's are resolved by the contract documents themselves. Over 50% of submittals sent by subs fail to conform to specification requirements or are grossly incomplete. When you send in an RFI to the Owner or submittal for approval it becomes your RFI or submittal, not your sub's. If you don't have time to check it then you haven't done your job – maybe you aren't ready to be the PM. The buck stops with you.

For those PM's who have assistant PM's working for them it is your duty to train them in these principals. When your assistant screws up who takes the blame? You do, because the buck stops with you.

Will the project be successful if you manage it properly? Absolutely yes. If you don't manage correctly will the project fail? It might or might not, but the profit margin for you and your subs will suffer, and your career will stagnate.

Written in March, 2021 by a Subcontractor who was a General Contractor earlier in his career.