

Job Site Politics

Every job site has a different complexion, influenced by a multitude of variables. The general contractor sets the pace for the entire job site, and is ultimately responsible for the interaction between the trades. Building and maintaining a good relationship with the general can make the difference between a successful, profitable job and a disaster. In this day and age, the completion schedule is driven by money, in the form of construction loan interest . . . everyone wants it all, and they want it now! The faster they can get it built and start turning an income, the better. In most cases, the schedule requires co-ordination between the different sub-contractors, an efficient flow of material deliveries, careful timing, and productivity.

Except in the rare situation when the customer is more concerned with quality than price, each sub-contractor is the lowest bidder of several shops competing for work, and everyone wants to get in, get done, and get out in the least amount of time to make the most profit. In this environment, the highest casualty is quality of work and craftsmanship, and the pressure placed on the installers can lead to short tempers, and a great potential for conflict. The electrician has to co-ordinate with the other trades for the physical space to install all the components of the electrical system, and the proper sequence and timing of the installation. The electrical systems interact with plumbing and mechanical equipment, and the timing of site development, and the installation of roofing, siding, and wall coverings is critical to the success of the project.

Architects and engineers submit their plans to inspecting authorities to be reviewed for code compliance, but more often than not, the concept of how it should work is dramatically different from how it can actually be installed. Change Orders, Requests For Information, and Design Clarification/Variation Requests, can bury the electrician in paperwork, and bog down the process of installation. In addition, suppliers of materials and products, (particularly lighting fixtures), may have long lead times for delivery, and further delay the process of construction.

In a perfect world, the electrical estimator is responsible for managing the project. This is not always the case, and a project manager has to be able to identify all deviations from the bid set drawings, and with help and input from the electrical foreman, write accurate and appropriate change orders. The owners, architects, and engineers will almost always try to represent that the estimator should have known what was needed for each aspect of the job, but the reality is that things change . . . and so will the price of installation. The electrician has to be careful not to let these changes, "slip through the cracks", without a signed "paper trail". Our primary objective is to provide an adequate and safe electrical system for the occupants of a building, but the architects and engineers must be held accountable for design flaws, and failures to indicate and identify the specific requirements for the system components they call for.

Crew management can be another great challenge for the electrical foreman. Every worker from beginning apprentice to seasoned journeyman has a different personality with different strengths and weaknesses. The successful foreman is able to identify these traits and utilize each workers skills to the greatest productivity in the process of installing the electrical systems. Encouraging people to work in a safe and conscientious manner, teaming workers together in compatible pairs, and keeping enough materials and the right tools for each job activity, are primary goals for every foreman.

People in this society, particularly construction workers, tend to banter and joke around a lot in their daily interaction. This verbal sparring can make the day go by faster and relieve some of the tensions of the fast track job site, but it can also lead to misunderstanding and abuse. Some workers will tease each other when they make mistakes or do something wrong, others will talk down to subordinate laborers or apprentices in the spirit of banter and joking, but the electrical foreman has to be careful to maintain respect and authority with the crew. Too much teasing and banter can tear down a person's confidence and self esteem, and make them feel like an outsider. People are at their best for quality and productivity when they see themselves as an integral part of a team, and know that their contribution is appreciated.

Having worked in the electrical trade of the construction industry for over thirty years, I've seen a lot of good and bad situations, and it still amazes me to see workers stop and chat, sometimes for almost an hour while they're on the clock! I wonder how they sleep at night, and how we got to this place where people don't seem to understand the concept of 8 hours work for eight hours pay. The satisfaction of having done a good job, and produced a valuable product should be a primary goal of every individual, and a good foreman can help instill these values in the members of his crew. It's not enough for a foreman just to be a good mechanic, he (or she), must also have good people skills, and keep the paperwork in order so that the electrical shop gets paid for the extras and change orders.

It's quite common that when times are good and the economy is booming, contractors place a high emphasis on safety and quality, and making sure that their work force is happy. But when times are tough and jobs are scarce, the whole complexion changes and staying employed can become a game of popularity. I have found that staying employed year round in the construction industry takes a lot of attention to all of these aspects, and maintaining a good reputation for quality and productivity is the key. New products and methods of installation are constantly being developed, and staying on top of these changes through research and continuing education is also very important to success. The electrical trade is by far, the most complex and diverse portion of the construction industry.

Success in this trade can best be achieved by following these guidelines;

Be dependable. Punctuality and conscientious work habits will never go out of style!

Stay informed. Research and learn about new products, new methods, and code changes!

Maintain good people skills. Be fair and consistent with other crewmembers and workers!

Do your paperwork! The shop has to get paid for your work!

Work with care! The safety of every person, your fellow crewmembers, other trades, and all visitors to the job site, has to be considered as an integral part of every work task. The cost of an injury can reduce profit and cause irreparable damage to your credibility and reputation!