A handful of contractors around the country were asked recently what they'd most like to see changed about working in the construction industry today. A handful of contractors does not a Gallup poll make, but the fact that they almost all wanted to change one of two things, does make one wonder. Top of the list, expressed as a concern by 58 percent of those interviewed, was the quality of personnel and their skill level.

Lacking plasterers adequately trained in solid renderings and fibrous moldings, a Georgia contractor tried sponsoring a plasterer from the United Kingdom with
trained personnel in the United States, which sent this contractor looking across the Atlantic for personnel.

This same contractor has the right approach, however, in his work to provide training for Americans. “I’d like to see across-the-board training for young men and women coming (or dropping) out of high school. Since the exterior insulation and finish barrier system has been outlawed here in Georgia, everyone has switched over to portland cement, which has its own problems. The problems we are seeing, then, are general building practice problems, not ones that are inherent to EIFS or portland cement. The answer is to get into training and do the best we can on our side of the fence, which was the basic problem, anyway.”

An Arkansas contractor who has enjoyed his 30 years in the industry and feels they have been good to him says, “It’s difficult to provide better training programs for those who want to work in the industry. Back when there were more unions, there were training and apprenticeship programs, and a person learned something and arrived on the job as an asset. Overall today, we are dealing with a different class of individual, less professional. With people coming in off the street, the contractors end
up training them on the jobs, which is an extra burden for the contractors. I’m not pumping up the unions, but going back to when there were more unions, a company arriving in town could call the Carpenters local if they needed carpenters, etc. That is not the way it is today. You end up working through temporary services. We do get some real good people out of some of these companies, but some are not so good—the ones that come in off the street.”

Expressing their frustration, several contractors, such as this one from Illinois, want to see “robots do the work. It’s difficult to coordinate everyone and get them on the same page. If you could program everyone to work in the same direction, it would be wonderful.” Another Georgian hits the nail on the head when he says, “Our most limited resource right now is human resources.”

**Moral Fiber for Building**

Perhaps the reason for this lies deeper than the declining influence of unions and their valuable training and apprenticeship programs. As noted by a Californian, this lack of training is a symptom of the lack of morals in society. “I’d like to see the labor pool be like the old days. Some of the new kids who are coming up the line, their values aren’t like those of the old school. I don’t think there’s as much pride in their work. I’ve been in the trade 23 years and it is a totally different labor pool now. The attitude has become ‘what can the employer do for the employee?’ rather than ‘what can the employee do for the employer.’ I’m having a tough time with that. I have my own in-house schooling and try to bring these kids along, and if they start out with a good attitude, I can work with them, but it’s a challenge trying to come up with a different attitude.”

Maybe it’s off-the-wall enough to talk about morals on the job site, but to then start talking about morals in society as a whole as a concern for contractors and those working in the construction industry probably seems like the kind of stretch everyone makes when they run out of material and wish there was such a thing as a mud-stretcher—something that happens in one’s dreams, not the real world. But maybe this is the key to reverting the declining standards and
work ethic in the industry (the construction and every other industry). Church used to be the place that taught people morals, reinforced by family members and society as a whole. But with the separation of church and state in schools and the declining influence of churches in the country, this influence has been eroded. Children need to be taught how to tell right from wrong so that they make the right decisions.

What we need is a moral code that is based on common sense, not any particular religion (to avoid treading on any toes in our multicultural and multi-ethnic society) and a way for contractors to help bring that moral code to kids and the existing work force. If anyone knows of such a code, speak up!

**Where’s the General Contractor?**

The other subject that had the attention of 42 percent of those interviewed was the deteriorating state of affairs with regard to general contractors. In a nutshell, GCs used to add value to the construction industry (and many still do, of course), but there is a growing tendency by GCs to abandon their coordinating role on the job site in preference for paper shuffling . . . and also to withhold payment from subs, causing them financial difficulties.

“The problem is basically that most GCs never leave their trailer,” explains a Floridian. “It’s usually a construction management team and a lot of the time, half of them never go out on site. [They] don’t understand what is going on and so they don’t organize well. The subs end up having to organize the job, and it’s a problem that has worsened over the last couple of years. I’m on a job right now that is running itself. The GC sits in the trailer all day and the subs on the site hardly talk to each other, so things go up in the wrong sequence and everyone is in each other’s way. There’s no management.

“For instance, I have a draft stop in the ceiling that needs to be hung. Meanwhile, the truss guy didn’t supply the
furring for me to hang it. So we try to get the framer to do it. But the framer continues framing, and now I can’t even get board up in the attic. So I have to hang some 50 boards in the ceiling in 2-foot sections. Normally there is nothing on the slab, just trusses. So we can get on a scaffold and lay down board, and it’s a process that usually takes us a day and a half. Because of the lack of coordination and proper management, this job will take us almost two weeks. We didn’t estimate for it, so the GC is being back-charged."

“When the subs have to tell the GC how to run a job, things get pretty strange,” adds a contractor from Georgia. “We have done several jobs where the GC has come in and fumbled everything up, and the subs have had to get together and try and coordinate projects so we can get back on track. One time, the GC tried to put the painter before some of the other subs. He tried to have the concrete poured before some of the stuff was roughed in—a number of things.

“What’s happening is that a lot of construction companies are changing to construction management and are subbing out everything, and they don’t have any employees of their own. The subs they put out are inexperienced and just don’t know the sequences. Of course, it is costing the subs money because jobs are taking longer to do and so they have to eat the extra overhead. The construction managers are the only ones making money, because they are doing it on a cost-plus basis. They just buy more time from the owner when things take longer, and they’re just raking in their negotiated profit and overhead.”

How come GCs are moving off their position of responsibility? As anyone familiar with the industry knows, GCs-of-old are being replaced increasingly by construction managers who are not like the old school. As a Californian points out, “It’s more of a paper-pushing deal now. There’s so much liability now compared to the old days, that GCs are trying to shunt responsibility”.

With regard to the late payments, an Illi-
nois contractor notes, “We have to go to the bank more often to borrow, and we end up paying interest on money that is owed to us because GCs take up to three months to pay us, rather than the 30 days that used to be or should be the norm.”

For this contractor, the problem is the GCs sitting on the funds. For one from Colorado, the problem is “the owners sit on the draw request, and we all wait for it downstream. But the GC doesn’t care and he doesn’t push for it, because he doesn’t have the labor expenditures the sub has.”

One basic principle for this kind of GC to consider is that team members who don’t pull their weight are usually the first to go. That’s a long-term idea to consider, and this kind of GC is not in it for the long haul. So subs working with this kind of GC are best off banding together and demanding the GC shape up or ship out. It can be done, and it’s a lot more interesting and pleasant for subs than continuing to take it on the chin just because “that’s the way it is done around here now.”

Which brings up the next point: In coming up with these two main areas of concern, the contractors were actually asked, “If you had one wish granted, what would you most like to change
about working in the construction industry?” That elicited responses that the contractors wanted to change the most, but about which they felt there was little they could do.

If there is one little message this article can get across, it is that something can be done about it. If man can fly, if the Berlin Wall can come down, if man can bounce around on the moon, then we can teach a bunch of kids some sensible ideas about how to live their lives, and we can persuade erring GCs to grab back their hard hats and start looking after the subs they rely on to complete their projects. It all starts with an idea and a determination. As the saying goes, “Where there’s a will, there’s a way.”

Will you?

About the Author
Steven Ferry is a free-lance writer based in Dunedin, Fla.