With the advent of more sophisticated buildings and increased regulations in the workplace in the past 15 to 20 years, we have seen the emergence of the general contractor’s project manager in the tiers of construction management. Prior to that, this level of management was only seen on larger projects or with those firms that operated on a large scale. The majority of jobs were built with the subcontractor working directly with the general contractor’s job superintendent. The “super” was the crusty, curmudgeon dictator who could, as the saying goes, “make you or break you.” He was given a wide range of authority and his word was gospel. Decisions were made in short order, and like him or not you usually knew where you stood with him at all times. He may or may not have had a lot of classroom education, but in almost all cases he had a world of hands-on construction experience, having earned his degree from the School of Hard Knocks.

With the increased presence of workplace regulations and the increased use of advanced technology in all phases of construction, we have seen the project manager emerge as a key element in the subcontractor relationship with the general contractor. This person has a higher degree of formal education, but more often than not very little hand-on construction experience. On-site decisions are not forthcoming as fast and often not in the best interests of the subcontractor. Critical issues at the site are not resolved in a clear, concise manner, and often the subcontractor is caught in the vise of conflicting decisions between the project manager and the job superintendent. The end result is confusion, expense, time delays and sometimes utter chaos.

In simple theory the project manager takes the administration of the project from the post-bid stage to its conclusion. He or she acts as liaison between their office, the architect, the owner and subcontractors. Project managers will sometimes issue contracts, change orders, schedules, pay requests, product submittals and in general provide overall direction to the project. Obviously larger projects would require added levels of administration such as senior project managers, project engineers, etc. The job superintendent would be responsible for scheduling his own forces and coordinating the subcontractor’s activities, assisting the project manager with certain functions and providing the ram-rod that keeps the project on schedule. Sounds simple--we wish it were.

Where the subcontractor sees the most apparent breakdown is when the lines of authority are not clearly defined in the general contractor’s organization, and crossover occurs. We see a decline in the authority of the job superintendent in the day-to-day on-site problems and more contact with the project manager.

Several things can cause this to occur. Let us cite some examples that many of us have experienced. Job delays bring the impatient owner’s repre-
sentative into the scene in a large way. Since he has been dealing with the project manager, he applies pressure to the project manager, who, out of frustration, starts working one-on-one with the subcontractor’s field forces. We also see instances where the job superintendent lacks the skills necessary to perform his work. Here the project manager steps in to carry the job forward. Other factors enter into this overlap of responsibilities: these are only two of many.

Because the project manager sometimes lacks hands-on experience, we see out-of-sequence scheduling resulting in poor trade coordination. Additionally the project manager, not understanding a subcontractor’s rates of production, demands increased manpower levels from the subcontractor, which in turn results in inefficient manpower and unanticipated high labor costs. The interior finish contractor finds that he must make up for inefficient job coordination that occurs in the early stages of the project. General contractors have short or clouded memories when it comes to remembering who caused a delay and when it happened.

In days past when we dealt with an experienced job superintendent, the simpler building and flexible regulations along with his experience allowed him to schedule around a delay and bring the job back on course with very little or no time and money lost. The key word here is experience. He understood production, or the lack of it, and he placed the blame for delays where it belonged and assessed costs to those who caused the delay.

It takes close coordination and communication at all times on all jobs, but especially on those jobs that have critical time frames. This is important to all subcontractors, but most important to the interior finish contractor who has to interface with many other subcontractors. In the real world, we see delays and accelerated schedules caused primarily by change orders, schedule breakdowns due to inadequate performance of other subcontractors or poor scheduling. On those jobs that have reasonable schedules, we see better coordination of work with efficient manpower levels. On those that don’t have reasonable schedules, we not only see our labor costs escalate but we see our accident frequency rise and our level of workmanship go down.

**What to Do**

There is no simple clear-cut hard and fast answer to this system, but there are several important cardinal rules we as interior subcontractors can put in place which will set up some damage control.

--Incorporate certain job conditions into your quotation, such as mutual progress scheduling, clean work area, hoist and trash disposal allowances to name a select few. These must be brief so as not to be lost in importance at the time of bidding.

--During contract negotiations, insist on the above conditions being inserted in the contract. Negotiate out damaging wording about manpower levels, back charges, etc. Read your contract carefully and insist on the most favorable conditions you can get to give your field forces the leverage they need to install the job. An important condition is your ability to recover costs due to schedule delays. You are entitled to time extension, overhead costs in the form of on-site supervision, idle equipment costs and office overhead and profit.

--You and you general superintendent should meet early on with the project manager and the job superintendent. At that time there should be an understanding of their intentions for your progress and your ability to respond to the schedule. If this varies from the original job schedule you had agreed to, you need to review it for increased costs. A review of special conditions you may have negotiated into the contract should be identified and understood, as the job superintendent may not be aware of certain on-site conditions you have negotiated into the contract.

--To the best of your ability, establish the line of authority between the project manager and the job superintendent.

--Your general superintendent and on-site superintendent or foreman must keep these lines of authority in focus during the course of the job.

--Maintain a rapport with principals in the general’s office. You may need his ear if you have to go around the project manager or superintendent should you reach an impasse with them.

--When you get conflicting directions from the project manager and job superintendent, ask for a clarification immediately. Recognize the shortcomings of each of these individuals and work with them, rather than against them, to gain your advantage.

--An important item--don’t fail to thank them when they help you out of a tight spot.

This article is not meant to be an indictment of the project manager/job superintendent structure, but rather to illustrate there are hazards in any managerial framework. Since this system can affect your on-site productivity, it is important to be able to deal with it in a precautionary and positive manner.

All of this points to the fact we must carefully choose our supervisory employees. Not only must they be knowledgeable in the specifics of our industry, but they must also be trained in the art of people-to-people relations. On-site relations have been and will continue to be an increasingly important factor affecting your bottom line.

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*Urban Rump*