

The Role of Field Supervisors

I like the term used by Gregg Schoppman of Fails Institute regarding the emerging role of superintendents: ***Salesmantendent***. Basically he is suggesting the role of the field supervisor has expanded from just running work to being a key member of the marketing team. Not in the sense of handing out brochures and giving sales pitches.

But in the sense that the performance by the field supervisor is paramount to the ability of the construction company to continue in the market place. By salesmantendent, Shoppman is referring to the ability of the field supervisor to handle new and more complex delivery systems, to work closely and collaboratively with other trades, to be a problem preventer and a problem solver, to effectively communicate and manage the inevitable conflicts which arise on projects. To be a major factor in the goal of the company to have ***“customers for life”***.

The first time I heard the expression “customer for life” was on a Zachary Construction Project at a petrochemical plant outside Beaumont, Texas. Interestingly enough, Zachary’s superintendent was the grandson of Zachary’s first superintendent on that project, and the son of the second one. Three generations on one project. That is customer for life. And the reason was the suggestion by Shoppman as to what is needed today: a salesmantendent who took care of the customer in an excellent manner. In part because of the character of the superintendent and in part because Zachary had a commitment to continuously improve, to provide on-going training to its field supervisory personnel in the technical skills but as well as the full range of project management, scheduling, quality, and communication skills. We never see great “salesmantendents” without seeing great leadership at the top. Mediocre leaders complain about the lack of qualified personnel; great ones see it as a challenge, an opportunity to grasp and create a competitive edge.

I am familiar with several large on-going projects in this state where several of the contractors are just about permanent fixtures, and primarily

because of the outstanding performance of their salesmantendents. I am familiar with more than one contractor which has lost such opportunities because of the weak performance of the field supervisors. And ultimate cause: Look up the ladder to the company president.

Bach in the book Illusions says that teaching is reminding people of what they already know. This article, and the one by Mr. Schoppman fall into this category. Everyone already knows that. I am just reminding people of what everyone already knows.

Field personnel should also be reminded of this as well. . They must also understand that the bar of performance is being elevated and be challenged to climb the ladder to the next rungs. I see too often the resistance in the field when management is attempting to implement needed and effective changes, or when the field is being asked to maintain those daily reports or do earned value, or to learn about managing the inevitable conflicts in the field in a civilized manner. Improvement is always a two way street.

And without having done a survey, it is my judgment that the most successful companies are those which have “best practices” groups, comprised of field supervisory personnel who have an opportunity to get together, share ideas, communicate their needs to the home office with a reasonable expectation that those needs will be honesty considered and acted upon. And where top management truly appreciates the role of its supervisory personnel, respects them as people and invaluable in achieving the goals of the projects and the company, commits the resources for their continuing improvement, and supports them instead of blaming them when a project gets into trouble. And actively seeks their input on how things might go better.

No quarterback has great statistics without a great offensive line. No company is great without a strong supervisory staff which is recognized and rewarded.