



Skilled and unskilled volunteers work together in Gulf recovery efforts. Photo by Alex Jones

Building Skills in Crew Leadership

By Jack Jensen

With thousands of volunteers helping with Gulf rebuilding projects, crew leadership skills have taken on new importance. Here are tips for crew leaders on working smarter with skilled contractors, unskilled workers or combination teams.

Many community-based organizations know what they're doing when it comes to rehab. Crew leaders know the nuts and bolts of the job like the back of their hands. But even the most experienced crew leaders can improve their efficiency by looking beyond hands-on construction and rehab skills and sharpening their proficiency in work planning, safety, motivation, and even conflict resolution. By mastering these skills, a supervisor can become a true leader.

Before the Work Begins

The keys to jobsite management are planning, organization, forethought, and more planning. Good crew leaders think a job completely through,

making a detailed list of each task to be performed in the order they must be performed.

For example, a simple line-item – “Remove water-damaged drywall and replace it” – has a critical path of setup, removal, mold treatment, hanging, taping (three coats), sanding, priming, repainting, touchup, and cleanup. Each of these tasks must be performed in order. But there are other tasks that other workers can be doing at the same time. There may be woodwork that also needs to be removed, sanded, primed, painted, and put back. Trim can be sanded and primed on sawhorses while another crew is busily taping and sanding the drywall. What about logistics? Is there another room that can be used for prep? What about dust? What skill level do the workers have? Anyone can rip down drywall, and most people can be taught to paint in an hour, but it takes training and a lot of practice to tape drywall well. How do you organize jobs so your skilled people are available to do the skilled work? How do you keep your unskilled people busy while the skilled people are doing their thing? What are your drying times?

Once the critical path and schedule are determined, the materials, tools and equipment must be organized. You don't want your drywall delivered on demolition day— where would you put it? It's heavy and fragile, and you only want to move it once. "Our gold standard is to have materials show up no more than four hours before they're needed," said Margaret O'Brien of the California Housing Partnership, which does acquisition/rehab/resale projects throughout Northern California. "If we're done with tools, they go back to the shop. We spend a lot of time thinking these things through. It's hard to measure how much we've saved, but theft is really a problem in some of our communities, and we haven't had much of a problem, so I guess we've been successful."

Caring for Your Crew

There is more to being a crew leader than managing the project – an effective leader pays attention to worker safety.

The importance of worker safety is obvious, for more reasons than one. "At the CHP, we put jobsite safety at the forefront," said O'Brien. "We emphasize hard hats, good grounding on electrical tools, safe set-ups, and communication." Set aside for a moment the humanitarian reasons for ensuring a safe work environment; the financial risk alone is overwhelming. The reduced risk of taking an extra day to ensure a safe environment can be measured in the hundreds, thousands, perhaps millions of dollars.

Getting the Most from Volunteers

One of the biggest challenges facing nonprofit crew leaders is the effective use of volunteers. This challenge became especially apparent in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, when volunteers poured to the Gulf region.

There are proven strategies for dealing with unskilled workers, and how to best mix paid and volunteer workers. For instance, volunteers' skills are best put to use at the beginning and end of jobs – demolition, site preparation, and material handling, or painting, landscaping, and cleanup. On some projects, such as "blitz builds," skilled people work elbow-to-elbow with inexperienced people, so pairing job teams to maximize productivity becomes a real art form.

All the preparation in the world will not eliminate one particular issue: construction is accomplished by people, and people may come into conflict.

William Travers, an electrical contractor from Columbus, Ohio, experienced with nonprofits, was among the legions of volunteers who poured into the Gulf region right after Katrina hit. "There was nobody organizing things and sometimes people would get hot-headed," Travers recalled. "When people don't get enough sleep, good food, and good direction – that leads to conflict. Recognizing personality types, knowing good strategies for dealing with difficult people, and having a toolbox of techniques for conflict resolution is just as essential as technical expertise."

All this preparation and skill building takes time, but it is well worth it. "Look at the numbers," said Travers. "If you can get even a small, 10 percent efficiency improvement on a crew of eight people, it's like creating another worker. On a volunteer crew, that's a really nice thing – you get that much more done. But on a paid crew, that's some big money."

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