

Service Through Structure

by Paul Eldrenkamp

Who, ultimately, is in control of a remodeling project? Let's think about that: It's the clients who are funding the job — you have to keep them happy if you want to get paid. They decide what they want done, how much to spend, and when they'll do the project. It's their house and they, not you, have to live in it — so if you don't do what they want, it can't be much of a service you're providing. As so many recent business books and magazine articles have said over and over again, your role is total customer satisfaction.

So it's obviously the clients who are in control.

But how do you reconcile this fact with the harsh truth that a client-controlled project is almost always a doomed project? In my experience, if the clients are in charge, I'm in deep trouble. Furthermore, irony of ironies, if the clients are in control, the clients *themselves* are in trouble. Forget about the contractor — how often have you seen a client-controlled project end happily for the clients?

I'm not talking about extreme control freaks who are hardly ever pleased with anything and are very difficult to work with. I'm talking about normal clients who are in the driver's seat primarily because we contractors put them there.

Losing Control

How do we put the clients in charge? I can think of two primary ways.

One is by not taking charge ourselves from the beginning. By being disorganized and unresponsive, by not keeping promises (or, almost worse, by not making any promises to begin with), by being too busy to put together a really good exit strategy for

the project before we start it — in all these ways, we abdicate our position as the ostensible professional in the relationship. There's a vacuum of leadership, and someone else tries to fill it — the client.

The second way to lose control is the polar opposite — by being too responsive to each and every client request. This one's a little more complicated and potentially controversial, so I'll spend a little more time on it.

For a long time, the (well-deserved)

to assume that to totally satisfy them we need to do whatever they ask. Let the clients wait until the cabinets are installed to select the countertop material. Let the clients use their brother-in-law for a plumber. Let the clients not pay the architect for any more drawings and have us build with the inadequate documentation we've got. Let the clients have us shut off our saws between 2 and 3 o'clock so the toddler can nap.

The truth, of course, is that doing

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reputation of remodeling contractors was that we did what we wanted — showed up when we wanted, and then selected products and construction techniques based on our own personal convenience regardless of what the plans and specs said — basically treating the clients' home as our sole domain and the clients themselves as a necessary nuisance.

Too Much Wow?

There's still some of this behavior within the industry. But, steadily, with the increasing professionalism of many remodelers, the pendulum has been swinging the other way. You now see more and more remodeling companies bending over backward to try to "wow" the clients with an extremely high level of service and accountability.

It's in our attempts to wow the clients that we're most at risk of putting them in charge, because one of the easiest mistakes we can make is

whatever the clients ask is not the shortest route to client satisfaction — it's one of the more arduous routes, because it means the contractor cedes control. It can become an anything-goes atmosphere on the job site, and the first to suffer is your crew; then you, as the owner; and, finally, the clients.

A Good Set of Rules

The only way to maintain control *and* high levels of satisfaction is through structure. Our first job as professional remodeling contractors should be to provide a good solid framework for a project, from the planning stage through the punch-list completion and warranty follow-up. And what creates structure is a good set of rules.

It's analogous to a historic sports match-up. Imagine a truly great baseball game. A major part of such a game's beauty and appeal comes from being played within a construct of very

clear and strictly enforced rules. Would you derive any excitement from — or even have any interest in — a baseball game played with no rules? The analogy, I think, holds for remodeling projects: They are much more rewarding and satisfying for all involved if there

to finish. Prospective clients often ask, “When can you start?” They should be asking, “When can you finish?” My answer to “When can you start?” is this: We will start a project when we’re ready to finish it, which is to say when we have sufficient information and re-

clients or responding to their requests — they do not put us at risk of diminishing the quality of the service we offer. Not one of them puts our interests ahead of the clients’, either, or the clients’ ahead of ours. Instead, they create an even playing field.

Whenever I lose control of a project, I can trace the problem directly to a moment when I broke one of my rules.

are rules that are clearly communicated, and gently and firmly enforced.

This is because clear, appropriate rules create a well-defined structure, and people whose house is being ripped apart by strangers are, in fact, intensely appreciative of this structure. And keep in mind that the people who are responsible for putting it back together — your crew — are equally grateful.

To serve as an effective structure, the rules need to be easy to remember and easy to enforce with consistency. This typically means they should be relatively few in number. They also need to be of clearly mutual and reciprocal benefit to you and your crew, and to the clients.

Most of all, they need to be *your* rules, meaning you need to believe in them to your very core. Otherwise, you will not enforce them with confidence and assertiveness. They need to be from your experience — heartfelt responses to the problems you keep having on your projects that you want to avoid.

Here are the rules I’ve come up with over the years in response to problems I was trying to keep from repeating:

We will do nothing illegal. We will not take cash so someone can avoid paying taxes. We will get permits as appropriate. We will not lie to authorities (or to anyone, for that matter).

We will start only when we are ready

sources; when we have the special orders placed, the contract signed, and the permit in hand; and when we have honorably fulfilled prior commitments.

This one rule gives us considerable leverage — adherence to this rule positions us extremely well for generating very high levels of satisfaction while also maintaining high levels of control.

If you ask us to do more, we will have to charge more and take longer. If the scope increases, the cost increases. If the scope decreases, the cost decreases. Likewise for the duration of the project. It’s simple math, and hard to argue with: More work equals more time equals more money. The clients cannot ask us to cut the price without also cutting the scope, because that defies the rules of mathematics. The reciprocal is that if the clients choose to cut back on the project, we will cut back on price and duration.

Our strength is our team. If clients ask us to bring someone new onto the team — a favorite plumber or a brother-in-law who’s an architect — they may be weakening the team, regardless of the strength of the new player. Do they want the established varsity team working on the project, or the untested pickup team?

These rules create our structure, and this structure enables us to do extraordinary things for our clients. Not one of the rules prevents us from hearing the

Full Disclosure

I can’t sit here and say that I never break any of these rules; just ask my crew. I can say, however, that whenever I lose control of a project and it starts going sour, I can trace the root cause of the problem directly to a moment when I did break one of these rules. Hopefully, I will learn from that mistake and have stronger resolve the next time around.

Once, at a piano lesson, I stumbled at a certain passage. I stopped playing and said, in frustration, “I always make that mistake.” My piano teacher looked at me and said, “Well, why do you practice it that way, then?” The reason I kept making the mistake, of course, was simple: That’s the way I always did it — and I was doing nothing to correct myself. My teacher suggested that, just before the troublesome passage, I stop, take a breath, position my fingers just right, and *not play a note* until I was sure it was the right note. Over time, I would learn to play the passage correctly without having to stop.

I’ve always remembered that particular lesson and have applied it to my business more than once. I’ve learned to recognize (not infallibly, but usually) the moments at which I’m most tempted to break one of my essential rules — to weaken the structure — and at those times I stop, take a breath, and wait until I know just what I want to say before speaking. In that way, over time, I steadily reinforce our structure — and the quality of the service we provide.

Paul Eldrenkamp is owner of Byggmeister Inc. in Newton, Mass.