

Construction Superintendent 2.0

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BLENDING OLD AND NEW SKILL SETS TO MAKE THE NEXT - AND BEST - GENERATION OF CONSTRUCTION FIELD LEADERS

There's only one thing society can count on to remain the same: Everything will change. The construction industry is quickly evolving – technologies develop, delivery methods transform and the pace with which we are expected to work is rapidly increasing. The skill set superintendents needed to be successful a decade ago is very different today. The modernization of the superintendent's role now demands new competencies, like collaboration, patience, respect, flexibility and accountability. These soft skills are a newer addition to this line of work, but there's no doubt that they play an essential role and are an important ingredient to a team's successes.

However, while the industry focuses on creating what comes next, it would be a big mistake to diminish the value of its "old school" construction superintendents. The torchbearers who led the way thus far still have a lot to offer and can teach up-and-coming field leaders. The next – and best – generation of superintendents will be a hybrid, a blend of old and new: Superintendent 2.0.

NEW SCHOOL

Superintendents still need to get the project done – on time and on budget. This hasn't changed. But the way to get there has. Today's construction industry needs more from



its superintendents than before, and with Lean construction practices becoming the industry standard, it takes different credentials and leadership styles to effectively implement these practices in the field. It takes emotional quotient (EQ) or emotional intelligence, and suffice it to say, EQ is not a traditional tool in a superintendent's belt.

Why EQ? One of the main pillars of Lean is respect for people, and this plays out in a multitude of ways on a jobsite. Empowering others, instead of cracking the whip. Listening to trade partners, instead of creating a work plan in a silo. Securing accountability relationally, instead of punitively. Finding the root cause of an issue and working collaboratively to address it as a team, instead of pointing fingers and encouraging back charges for rework.

OLD SCHOOL

When you hear the term “old school superintendent,” you may think of someone who is stubbornly resistant to technology, who has a hot temper and a loud voice, and who rolls their eyes at words like “emotional intelligence.” You may envision someone who manages a project all alone, aggressively pushing from the top down, acting more like a general at war than as a leader of a team of professionals. The picture these qualities paint isn’t a pretty one.

But while these stereotypes may be true to a certain extent, they overlook the true value these old school builders still bring. The most obvious example simply being their vast depth of experience. These traditional superintendents understand the work of construction in a far more intimate way than is required or practical today. They cut their teeth working with tools and rolls of hand-drawn plans. They had only their bodies and minds, working without the luxury of computers, tablets and smartphones. This knowledge is an asset, and those years of hard-learned lessons should not be causally disregarded as irrelevant because they come packaged with gray hair and readers.

Deeper than this, however, are the “old school” values inherent in many of these traditional builders. These values include a work ethic that compels them to make their projects successful no matter what it takes, and this makes them highly creative problem solvers. They include an understanding that you’re only as good as your word, that you lead by example, and how important it is to craft your reputation. And they include an appreciation for the benefit of making mistakes, because it’s only through these that we learn to be better.

HERE COMES SUPERINTENDENT 2.0

The next generation of field leaders will bring the best of both old and new to the trailer. They will embody traditional values around working hard, having personal accountability and getting the project to the finish line without fail. They will bring a humility that lets them continue to get their hands dirty as they put in the inevitable long hours alongside everyone else on their jobsite, irrespective of their title or task. They will seek out mentors, maintain a thirst for knowledge and appreciate the people who came before them, who paved the way and passed down their lessons learned.


They will also bring a leadership style that is nuanced and thoughtful. They will prioritize the needs of the humans who do the work and value building a successful team. Their trailers will look and feel like professional offices, and the interpersonal culture on those construction sites will be highly cooperative and respectful. Their deadlines will not be met by beating down their trade partners, but rather by lifting them up. They will embrace the endless progression of technology, seek new tools and processes, and welcome the efficiencies all of these can offer.

It’s apparent that the old and new schools of thought and behavior are not that far apart. What really separates them is our language and our preconceptions. But if there is any one thing that will certainly be left behind as a dinosaur in construction, it is this: a miserable, dysfunctional trailer ruled by a tyrant who is all mouth and no ears – and these superintendents come in all shapes, sizes, and ages. This is not a hallmark of their generation, but rather what kind of builder they have allowed themselves to become.

AND IT’S MORE IMPORTANT THAN YOU THINK

While these kinds of superintendents may have produced incredible results on their projects, they did not do so without leaving casualties in their wake. “Win at all costs” comes with a price tag, and a victory extracted at the expense of someone’s humanity rings hollow. We have been willing to overlook these for too long, and it has taken a toll.

It is important to remember that there is more than one metric for measuring a project’s success, and the health of the team standing at the finish line is one of – if not THE – most important. Right now, as the industry grapples with a bona fide mental health crisis, struggles with a devastating labor shortage, and navigates unprecedented supply chain stressors that threaten the lives of our projects, how team members treat each other matters significantly. Quality of life at work matters significantly. These have taken a back seat long enough. It’s time to shift expectations and behaviors.

The industry is changing. It’s imperative to find the way to change with it and help move it in a sustainable direction. 



About the Author

Keyan Zandy serves as chief operating officer for [Skiles Group](#), a general contracting firm known for its Lean construction focus. He oversees the firm's daily operations and ensures that Lean processes are continually improved and consistently practiced. Zandy is the co-author of *The Lean Builder: A Builder's Guide to Applying Lean Tools in The Field*, a Shingo-prize winning book and online community, and he is co-founder of Smart Safety, a construction safety and crisis app with patented geofencing technology.

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