

Communicating for Project Success

BY NOELLE LORD CASTLE

THE WORKING RELATIONSHIP between you and your contractors is essential to your project turning out the way you envision. Restoration projects are challenging, in many ways more so than new construction endeavors. Unique and unpredictable, they often require extra steps, slower production schedules, and very flexible attitudes by everyone involved. This is a perfect set-up for communication breakdowns as impatience and frustration can build. Being prepared and anticipating communication challenges can save you many headaches, avoid costly misunderstandings, and help everyone do the best job.

A GOOD BEGINNING

Hopefully you have shared your photos and notes about your project before you hired someone. If not, take the time to develop a good outline for your project including visual examples of what you want, detailed lists of what you need done, and any other project details you have collected. It is critical that you share this information with all the tradespeople you hire, even if they are only completing a piece of the project.

THE FINE PRINT

Carefully review any written contract or proposal before you sign it, but also as a project gets underway. Clarify any details you are unsure about, especially if you have never worked with the contractor. Written contracts can be constraining, limiting a project's scope and a contractor's ability to complete tasks. Be sure to discuss how flexible you are toward operating outside the contract specifications or expanding on an existing agreement.

BASIC COMMUNICATION

Do not leave it up to the "professional" to take the lead in communication. Take charge of making sure your project turns out just the way you want by facilitating open, continuous communication. Communicating your needs up-front, regarding both the technical aspects and the working relationship, will ensure fewer misunderstandings down the line.

Expectations: How are you going to work with this contractor? How much do you want to participate? How do you want the jobsite managed and left at the end of each day or week? How do you expect your home, belongings, family, pets to be treated? What are your "home policies" (smoking, garbage, use of facilities)?

Decision Process: How up-to-date do you want to be regarding any changes? At what point do you expect to be consulted? Inability to contact you quickly could compromise the production schedule which will ultimately cost someone time, money and frustration.

Personnel: Who is in charge? Don't assume the person you spoke to during the initial process will be onsite every day.

Scheduling: How informed do you need to be regarding the schedule for completing the work and having workers on-site? Avoid famous "disappearing acts" by tradespeople by clearly stating that this is not acceptable up front.

Payment: Speak very frankly about the timeline you are working with and your expectations for the payment schedule. Do not pay in full until the items on the final Punch List are completed.

Once the project is underway, check in regularly to catch up on what is going on. Ask questions if you are unsure about anything; it is always preferable to head off a mistake than try to fix it after the fact.

ASSUMPTIONS

Some tradespeople are miracle workers, but even they cannot read your mind (as much as they may wish they could). Contractors may not ask your opinion when you "assume" they would, and this can create conflicts. The contractors' priority is to get the job done and make a living doing it. This is not a bad thing, but it does mean some of their values may be different from yours. They may fear prolonging production by bringing you into a particular decision, or they may believe you do not want to be consulted. Ultimately this is not their house, they are not emotionally attached to it, and so they will naturally look at things very differently.

DEALING WITH CONFLICTS

How will you handle miscommunications and misunderstandings? They WILL happen; it is much easier to deal with them if you plan for them. The regular check-ins will be most helpful here as many subjects will come up before they turn into conflicts. ■

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