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## Strategies To Achieve A Zero Punch List - A Cultural Problem At Its Roots

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I recently attended the joint ASM/AGC conference on the difficulties of punch lists. Once again we were treated to another in the decades long discussion on this topic. How to effectively manage punch lists, with everyone pointing his or her finger at everyone else. The results of the discussion were predictable. No resolutions of the complaints were to be had. Many in the audience went away with a nagging sense of hopelessness in an arena where events seem to continue to spin out of our control. Our destiny is still in the hands of outside forces!

The discussion covered many arguments but very little of what I believe are the real causes of the difficulties of managing punch lists. This is not to say that a lot of the typical points raised are not valid, **they are examples of the symptoms - not the root causes.** The conference focused on functional difficulties, while failing to grasp the larger picture. It is much more of a challenge than just functionality. There did not seem to be any common denominator. It was just a seemingly endless, random series of misfortunes that all contractors, architects, and owners endure while grappling with punch lists.

Well, I have a different take. To me the root causes are more cultural than functional.

In my 29 years of work experience both in the industry and as an independent strategic planner and business advisor, I have had the opportunity to sit in virtually every seat in the entire construction hierarchy. I have been the owner, the property manager, the outside consultant, the designer, the general contractor, the subcontractor, the sub-subcontractor, and the material supplier. In evaluating companies from the inside as I occupied all these different perches, a number of universal factors stand out. It is in the cultural areas that I find the root causes of the ills of the industry. The common denominator is that all companies have people and people reflect and personify their culture.

What exactly do I mean by culture? It is the set of values, beliefs, faiths, customs, traditions, ethics, and standards that form the foundation of a civilization and ultimately our business organizations and how we perform in the marketplace.

The cultural demise to which I am referring includes: weak leadership, greed, fast track construction, not treating others with a sense of dignity and honor, deep internal hostilities among and between individuals, departments or divisions of the same organization, deep mistrust in all directions, a lack of respect (remember, respect is earned not ordered), poor customer service, poor customer satisfaction, the enjoyment by superiors in the bullying of subordinates, inability to responsibly handle freedom, a lack of order and discipline, a deep lack of personal responsibility, loss of liberty, the intrusion of government as the unwanted, unnecessary, incompetent third party in almost every two party relationship, and most importantly, the loss of our ability to exercise reasonable judgement and prudent behavior as individuals. Years ago, the standard my law professor imparted to me was, "What would a reasonable man do, given the circumstances?" The reasonable man concept has been another casualty of our current culture.

If every owner or chief executive officer were to take an objective look at his or her own company's behavior, and measure the items I have outlined against the performance of each organization, how would they fare? Often, those in leadership positions are unable to be objective or unable to extract themselves from deep denial. In order to be objective one must be willing and able to accept a reality attack. If we don't first openly acknowledge the depth and breadth of the problems, we cannot begin to solve them. My clients often don't like what they hear from me but they respect what I have to tell them.

**You must understand before you are understood.**

I believe that if you focus your efforts on the following points, your business will be successful and you will not experience the punch list troubles that so many contractors encounter.

- Customer satisfaction
- Customer service
- Quality goods and services
- Employee goodwill
- Adding value to your customers
- Performance
- Perpetual improvement
- Focus on the solution not the problem

Many of the companies that I have seen close up suffer more from their own internal behavior than at the hands of others. What appears to be unjust treatment is not the problem but a symptom. I find the root causes by exploring deep inside the soul of a company.

This is not only an industry indictment, but it applies to our customers, their agents and all the agencies and authorities that surround us as well. Cultural deficiencies are universal. Remember that the common denominator is people. With a clear understanding of where to look for solutions we can all be exonerated of the charges by strategically rehabilitating our organizations.

We must look first at ourselves to solve problems before we look to lay blame on others. Internal evaluation and planning ultimately create wealth and maximize the value of our businesses.

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