

Choosing a Contractor

The perfect home has materials and systems that work exactly as designed. Unfortunately because all homes are subject to unpredictable weather seasonal extremes and they are built by imperfect materials with imperfect hands, the perfect home is unattainable. It isn't uncommon for an industry established method or material of construction to be determined over time to be a less than optimal way to do something, or a complete failure. There will always be incidences of poor or incorrect workmanship, but in general most contractors adhere to established industry guidelines. A successful construction project will minimize the effect of uncontrollable factors, and maximize both cost and time effectiveness.

The Controllable Factor: Contractor-Manager (CM), or Manager-Contractor (MC)

- Contractor-Manager: (CM)
 - CM types prefer to be hands-on and work in most or all areas of construction. They have advanced skill sets in some but not necessarily all areas. Their extensive hands on experience and depth allows them to be somewhat less dependent on the availability of subcontractors.
 - A CM will naturally gravitate toward areas or tasks he or she enjoys.
 - A CM leads and trains by demonstrating what needs to be done, with some job shadowing to ensure comprehension and quality. A CM is highly dependent on a self-starting autonomous workforce with some basic construction skills and desire to learn.
 - A CM is directly responsible to ensure timelines and workmanship are maintained.
- Manager-Contractor: (MC)
 - The MC is more of a generalist, an overseer who is less focused on craftsman specifics. He/she is familiar with and works in all phases of construction. He/she can fill in where necessary especially to maintain timelines.
 - His/her skill set is more focused on effective communication in all forms, planning, forecasting, and coordination of labor and materials.
 - Timelines are maintained with coordination, oversight, and detailed expectations of sub-contractors, owners and product vendors.
 - The MC often will have multiple, simultaneous projects.

The Uncontrollable Factors: (Numerous, Unpredictable and Challenging)

A project's complexity, physical location, construction or de-construction timing and accessibility, weather restrictions, code requirements, and workmanship are all moving targets. Brainstorm with your contractor to identify and anticipate the uncontrollable factors to make them as controllable and predictable as possible.

A well thought out, detailed Work Scope can reduce stress, the number and severity of the uncontrollable factors, and improve the likelihood of a successful project.

The following examples are only a sample of opportunities. There are many more not covered:

- Basements and attics are components of a home that are the first lines of defense from water. If either fails, the home fails.
 - Plans to finish a basement should take into account soil type, compass heading, the type of foundation, and the physical management of bug infestation which is typically higher in rural locations.
 - An attic remodeling project should take into account high winds, weather and driving rains, and the materials and methods used to physically separate conditioned from unconditioned spaces. Accessibility of mechanicals must be arranged.
 - See PHI newsletters: *"Five Considerations for Home Projects and Maintenance"* and *"Questions and Considerations for Energy Saving Projects"* as starting points to frame considerations.
- Unique skills and workmanship are required for different types of projects. For example, the skills required to remodel a kitchen or bathroom are very different from those needed for an addition.
- Upgrade the bath fan & ductwork when replacing a roof. Attic areas can be hard to access especially at the eaves where most bath fans are located. When replacing a roof, remove the roof decking above the bath fan(s) to improve accessibly and facilitate bath fan replacement. (See PHI newsletter: *"Bath Fan Operations"*)

- With any interior remodeling projects, insulating interior wall(s) for better sound control should be a consideration. Adding outlets or computer/communication system components should also be considered for future conversions from bedrooms to offices or other activities.
- If replacing a roof and the chimney is no longer in service, remove the chimney below the roof line to eliminate areas prone to leakage. Before concealing this shorter chimney in the attic and making it much less accessible, seal the top of the chimney and the area where it comes through the attic floor with polystyrene board insulation and expandable foam. This will greatly reduce conditioned air losses and reduce a home's operating costs. (See PHI newsletter: "*Reducing Infiltration Loses*" for recommendations and pictures explaining the process)
- A remodeling or addition project is much more complex than a roof replacement. Both have uncontrollable variables and opportunities that need thoughtful planning.
- Deconstruction & Accessibility Opportunities: Construction projects (new or existing) provide accessibility opportunities that may improve and enhance the project. Often these opportunities are short in duration so planning and forecasting is vital. Once an opportunity is missed and concealed, it may be difficult or impossible to access or remedy down the road.
- Create a detailed timeline of all work done. Before, during, and after pictures may improve resale price and home desirability. Details should include products used, as well as contractor practices, procedures and warranties.

Creating a Proactive and Measurable Work Scope/Contract:

The written Work Scope/Contract should specify project basics such as methods and materials to be used, costs, and timeline. A breakdown of all pricing and a timeline is critical. There should be minimal surprises. The timeline will take into account possible delays related to additional inspections, bad weather, supply issues, worker shortages, etc. Objectives and expectations of both contractor and client should be discussed and included in the contract. To ensure success, it is mandatory to meet regularly with the contractor at the worksite for updates, to address concerns, and to problem solve together. The goal is to minimize mistakes, maintain good communication, and adhere to a workable timeline that takes advantage of all possible opportunities. All parties should sign and date the Work Scope/Contract on a legal document. All parties should receive a copy of the signed contract.

Communication: (What to do and expect)

- The best contractors are usually in demand for the high quality of their work rather than how they communicate.
 - Are there communication weaknesses? What can you do to bridge understanding and minimize stress?
 - What are the contractor's areas of concern? How can you help him/her focus on what he/she does best?
 - You may need to interview several contractors to find the one who seems to be the best fit.
- Is there effective two way communication?
 - Can the contractor summarize what you want him/her to do?
 - Does the contractor dismiss your ideas and only tell you his ideas?
- Projects will require ongoing decisions, some with very little warning, in person, email and over the phone.
 - Is the contractor approachable and realistic, or prickly and off putting? Do you find yourself avoiding interactions and possible opportunities to detail project goals and uniqueness?
- References / Feedback:
 - What do they say about the level of communication?
 - What did they find most pleasing and most frustrating about the work or the contractor?
 - Would they use the contractor again? Why or Why Not?

Hiring a Contractor:

The most successful contractors possess both CM and MC skill sets. Contractors, who consistently listen and learn, will adapt, and anticipate taking full advantage of deconstruction accessibility opportunities, and implementing new methods and materials of construction. Contractors associated with a professional association with a code of ethics such as the La Crosse Area Builders Association is a good start.

**** It is unwise to use price alone as the determining factor when choosing any contractor. ****

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