

How to Gain Respect From Experienced Co-Workers

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YOUNG CONSTRUCTION LEADERS MUST LEARN HOW TO NAVIGATE RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE SEASONED PROS ON THEIR TEAM.

A potential client recently asked me, “How do you handle a superintendent 30 years older than you giving you a hard time?”

On the other end of the spectrum, a 25-year-old project manager recently asked me how to run an effective jobsite meeting when everyone in it has 20 years more experience than him.

I love these questions because I have direct experience with them: In my last role, I was promoted to vice president of preconstruction and sales at 28 years old, and most of my team – estimators, superintendents, project managers – were anywhere from 20 to 50 years older than me.

One of the great things about construction is that it is an apprenticeship- and mentorship-based industry. The people with the experience take the next generation under their wing and show them the ropes.

But it's also common for someone in their 20s, 30s, or 40s to run a jobsite, department, or company, while the most experienced people are in a key support role. So, if you fall into that 20s-to-40s bucket, it's really important that you understand how to navigate relationships with your older, more experienced co-workers.



When you do that successfully, jobs will run better, people will be happier and your teams will have a beautiful diversity of thought that you really can't put a value on.

I made a lot of mistakes in my journey (and still do), but I learned some good ways to gain respect from experienced co-workers. Whether you're a young PM who wants a better working relationship with your superintendent, a VP with a new bidding strategy for a senior estimator 20 years older than you, or a project executive who wants to be president of the company one day, here are some ways to navigate those relationships and gain respect from your more experienced peers.

ADMIT WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW

From the second you walk into that room as a young person

with a title that gives you authority, almost everyone is going to be thinking the same thing: “Agh here we go again. Another young kid who doesn’t know anything about building buildings about to tell me how to do my job.”

So you’ve got to beat them to it. It could sound something like this: “Before we get started, I just want to acknowledge how much I need to learn. I am not going to know everything, but I promise that I am a hard worker and a sponge who will do everything I can to learn every day while we work together.”

Then, show up every day for months and months and be exactly that person: the young, hard-worker who learns like crazy, and shows deep respect for the experience around you.

Over time, the consistency with your words and actions will gain you a ton of respect. It won’t be easy, but it works so much better for gaining respect than pretending to be someone you’re not.

SEEK HELP

You need mentorship and guidance from your experienced team mates. And you need their help and support to get projects done, make money, and run a successful company, so make sure you tell them that.

“I can’t promise I’ll always agree with you or won’t push back sometimes, but I can promise that I know I need your help and will go into every conversation with an open mind to whatever you have to say. Without you, we would never be able to do this.”

I think some people get worried this takes away credibility, but it doesn’t. It builds trust. Just make sure you truly mean it because otherwise you’re being manipulative, which will have the exact opposite effect.

ASK QUESTIONS

When you do have an idea or need help, make sure you are asking questions, not telling people what to do. So, instead of “You need to stop bidding on projects with [client X]. It’s hurting our whole team” try “Hey, I noticed when we work with [client X] they end up being pretty rude to our project managers. Meanwhile, we haven’t done much work with [client Y] and they seem to treat our people pretty well. What do you think about devoting more energy to bidding [client Y] and less to [client X]?”

It takes more energy, but asking questions instead of telling people what to do demonstrates that you don’t know everything, are open to feedback and ultimately have an idea that you’d like to explore.

You’ll find it leads to much more healthy debate where everyone gets to share their opinion, which is really important for building allies. Plus, it shows you respect the experienced people around you and want to understand them. They usually have a pretty darn good reason why they’re doing what they’re doing, so you should be open to what it is.

TAKE OWNERSHIP OF MISTAKES

No matter what you do, eventually you are going to make a mistake. And you better take full ownership of it to anyone who will listen, especially the people you’ve been trying to build trust with all this time.

In the moment, your brain and heart will be screaming at you to find a way out of the blame and say that it wasn’t your fault. Resist that temptation.


Instead, do the exact opposite:

“This is 100% on me.”

“I missed it.”

“I could have caught this.”

For a brief period, it will feel like the worst feeling in the world, but then, a day will go by. Then, two. Then a week. And you’ll have experienced workers coming to you and saying, “Hey, I know you’re probably beating yourself up but it’s OK. We all mess up, but you owned it. That’s important. Now learn from it.”

What was an awful situation will turn into an incredible opportunity to prove everything you’ve been saying. So don’t hide from it, own your mistakes and gain more respect than you could ever imagine. 



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