

## **Anything goes or assume nothing?** The value of the pre-construction conference

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On the first day of my first corporate job many moons ago, I was parked in my boss's office and on the wall was this very simple needlepoint piece in a wooden frame. The entire content of the needlepoint picture were the words 'assume nothing'. I stared at it for hours that first day trying to decipher what it *really* meant.

I was making things more complicated than necessary looking for some hidden meaning in those two words. A couple of months into the job, the meaning became crystal clear – there was no great mystery, it was literal – ASSUME NOTHING! That little patch of needlepoint has served me well through the years and I would like to take this opportunity to impart its value on builders, designers and homeowners alike. It just might streamline your next project.

We have all heard or experienced our share of building or remodeling projects gone sour. In some cases the project goes south because the personalities of the builder/designer and the homeowner were simply not a good match. Another reason is one or more parties to the project are inherently dishonest (not very common but it can happen). But more often than not it is because one or more parties have made ... assumptions – and poor ones at that!

I dare say we all make assumptions, but I would like to suggest that there is a time and place for making assumptions. For example: it would be safe to assume that the local Boys and Girls Club *would* like a cash donation. However, a building/design project is not the place for making assumptions if your goal is long-term project satisfaction. It is rare for a project to be built exactly to plan. So suffice it to say, it is easier to roll with the proverbial construction punches if everyone shares common expectations and goals. Hence the value of the pre-construction conference.

The pre-construction conference is a face-to-face meeting of the building and design professionals involved in a particular build/remodel project. At the very least the meeting should include the homeowner(s), the general contractor, the project Forman, the architect or designer and the interior designer. If possible, it is also valuable to have the plumbing contractor and the electrical contractor present as well. To fine tune this even further, include the landscaper, roofer and sheet rock installer (especially if you have a distinctly modern style with little or no window casing or trim).

Building projects are comparable to a massive jig saw puzzle, every component or phase relates to every other component or phase but with so many 'specialists' it is easy for each member of the team to develop tunnel vision and lose sight of the big picture. By bringing all these people together around one table you can enhance the quality of a project by aligning peoples assumptions which ultimately can minimizing finger pointing when and if things do go sideways.

Recommended topics for discussion at the pre-construction conference include:

- Define the purpose of the project. Is the objective to enhance resale value, add space, improve utilization of existing space, repair storm/accident damage, increase energy efficiency, improve indoor air quality or maximize the view? By having a clear understanding of the project objective you can minimize tangents and help keep most everyone focused on the prize – an on time, on budget project.

- Define the scope of the project. Is it a remodel, an addition, a complete gut or new construction? Defining the scope can assist the participants in developing realistic time tables.

- Define the style of the project. Make sure all project participants have a clear vision of the style or theme of the project. If the electrician knows that there is a Victorian theme than he/she will know intuitively that installing the latest modern toggle switch would not be keeping with the theme or if the kitchen cabinets are four inches below the ceiling in an ultra modern kitchen, the cabinet installer will not be tempted to install stacked crown molding to fill in the gap.

- Establish a mutually agreeable time table. It is important for everyone to know the anticipated design/construction time table so that materials can be selected and ordered, furnishings can be packed up, trades people and product deliveries can be scheduled and last but not least vacations can be scheduled. Remember pets and the potential need to confine or board them during a project.

- Establish a communication conduit. How is everyone going to communicate with one another during the project – weekly meetings, e-mails, faxes, phone calls, a message board (a pre-agreed upon location for post it notes or a white board) or all of the above? By maintaining consistent and open communications, you will be hard pressed to derail even the most complicated project.

By bringing all this information to the forefront, project participants can share ideas and establish the confidence that they are all reading from the same project page. If there is mutual respect between all parties, individuals will be less inclined to make assumptions. The net result is a savings of time, money and sanity and a project that best reflects the collective vision of the participants with the added benefit of being on time and on budget – does it get any better than that?