

# 10 THINGS YOU DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOUR FOREMEN



by Mark Breslin

## A Message to Our Contractors:

I bet you think you know your foremen pretty well. You don't. Really.

They've been working for you forever, right? But you haven't really been paying attention.

Your foremen are the backbone of your company. And they are holding back on you. You're missing a lot by making assumptions about who they are and what they think. And those assumptions are costing you hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of dollars in lost profits over the course of their, and your, careers.

I've spent the last several years talking with and training several thousand foremen and superintendents all over the U.S. and Canada, so I know what I'm saying when I tell you that honestly, you don't have a clue what's going on inside their heads. Let's start by examining a list I put together of ten very important things you probably don't understand about your foremen.

1. Your foremen don't see themselves as professionals. They don't describe themselves that way. They don't see it as a professional position — in fact, they barely see it as a management position. If guys who are going to manage \$100 million to \$1 billion in projects over the course of their careers aren't professionals, then what are they? Maybe you should ask them.
2. On average, your foremen have received *zero formal professional leadership and management training* to prepare them for this high-level responsibility, role and identity.
3. Your foremen don't know what they do for a living. When I ask them, a full 90 percent respond, "I'm a [pipefitter, ironworker, boilermaker ... fill in the craft]." *This is the wrong answer.* It reflects a craft-worker mindset, not a supervisory one. The correct answer is, "I am a professional construction foreman/superintendent." It's very difficult for them to make that jump and not feel embarrassed, but how they see themselves determines how they act and lead on the job. They are no longer just "one of the guys."
4. Your foremen rarely solicit input from their crews. They a) think they will look weak, b) worry that someone else will get credit for a good idea and take their job, c) would never think to ask, or d) don't even know that it's part of their job.
5. Your foremen run their crews almost 100 percent of the time using *authority*, not *influence*. Which approach do you think is more effective, productive and profitable?
6. Your foremen are often stuck between the roles of boss and friend. This kills the ability to discipline and hold others accountable for their actions.

7. Your foremen do not effectively delegate. They are get-it-done people and, therefore, over-participate in the action at the job site. They are excellent at directing tasks. They generally do not empower people and wouldn't know how to anyway. Wonder whose fault that is?
8. Your foremen often have confused loyalties between their roles as multi-million dollar company managers and union members. The peer pressure of being a "good union guy" is leveraged regularly by their peers, reducing their effectiveness and authority.
9. Your foremen do not admit mistakes or failures. Failure is not a learning experience in their eyes; failure is simply failure.
10. Your foremen do not know how to effectively motivate their crews. The most effective and well-documented tools of praise and positive reinforcement are generally entirely absent. What was not given to them will not be given to others.

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Now let's review. I'm willing to guess a few of the items on this list didn't come as a surprise to you. So the obvious question is, what are you doing to fix these attitudes among your foremen? By refusing to act or address the problems, you own them — they're all on you.

How about the attitudes and actions on the list that you *didn't* know about? Now that you do, what's your next move? Are you going to discuss them and provide your guys with the tools to address them, or just rationalize them away and take the path of least resistance?

Several hundred thousand foremen are waiting for help. They're doing the best they can with what they've got, but they need their employers to help them understand how important and vital they are to their company and the industry. They need serious professional support to become high-quality leaders and managers. But really, I think they're waiting for you to acknowledge the challenges they face and the gaps in their skill sets — and then do something about it.

*Mark Breslin is a leadership strategist and author of several books, including, most recently, The Five Minute Foreman: Mastering the People Side of Construction. Mark has been serving as the CEO of the United Contractors association for over 25 years and is the president of Breslin Strategies, Inc. Visit his website at [www.breslin.biz](http://www.breslin.biz) for additional information.*