

## **ROUGH and TOUGH**

how to:

# How to be the General Contractor for your project

**AN INTRODUCTION TO SUB-TRADES** BY NEIL MATTHEWS

## Is it realistic to be the general contractor for your own project?

Absolutely! However, should you be brave enough to take on the role of general contractor, there are plenty of considerations. This is a challenging, full-time job even for a seasoned professional, so you'll need to be well prepared. Managing any job site, whether it be a new home or renovation, is not something you will be able to do with just a couple of hours of free time per day. Communication is key. Think about it like this: the level of communication determines the ultimate success of every project and affects the satisfaction level of all the participants. A successful outcome requires time, planning and daily management. So let's take a look at one aspect of the process – sub-trades.

### **Sub-Trades**

A sub-contractor is typically a self-employed tradesperson who specializes in one particular area of the construction process. Although every job site is slightly different – some quite challenging in fact – the daily task remains relatively repetitive. Generally paid by either piecework or a set contract price, most tradespeople figure out how to become highly efficient, therefore increasing their bottom line. Crews become very good at the installation process; in essence they become “pro”.



*Neil Matthews owns and operates Trendsetter Renovations, specializing in kitchens and bathrooms.*



## Let's take a look at a list of some of the more common sub-contractors you may deal with in residential construction, in this order:

### CONSTRUCTION TRADES

- EXCAVATION
- ARTESIAN WELL DRILLING
- FORMING & CONCRETE /FOOTINGS & FOUNDATION
- SEPTIC SYSTEMS
- FOUNDATION COATINGS/DAMPPROOFING
- FRAMING
- ROOFERS
- SIDING
- MASONRY

### MECHANICAL TRADES

For Rough-ins of Mechanical Systems

- HVAC (HEATING VENTILATION AIR CONDITIONING)
- PROPANE GAS INSTALLATION
- PLUMBERS
- ELECTRICIANS
- TELEPHONE
- CABLE
- HOME AUDIO & ENTERTAINMENT
- HOME SECURITY SYSTEMS

### FINISH TRADES

- INSULATION – STANDARD OR SPRAY FOAM
- DRYWALL
- TAPING/PLASTERING
- PAINTERS
- FINISH CARPENTRY
- STAIRS/RAILS
- CABINETS
- FLOORING
- ALL MECHANICAL TRADES FOR FINISH INSTALLATION
- LANDSCAPING



This system works well with the pros who take pride in their work, but it can also be an “all speed, no quality, corners cut” scenario for those with seemingly little integrity. This is why the work has to be inspected for quality control before the payment is made. As with hiring a general contractor (as detailed in *Home & Cabin* summer 2014) the same rules apply. Talk to people. Get referrals on who is trustworthy and doing really good work. If permits are in place, corners can't be cut because of the inspection process.

Also, keep in mind that the inspection process does not apply to many aspects of the construction process. As an example, there is no inspection process for cabinetry, trim work, drywall or painting. Although being some of the most expensive fixtures in your home, this work is considered to be facial, or non-structural, with no mandate for inspection. In this case, an experienced general contractor looking out for a client's best interest should monitor quality control. I personally think there should be some measurement of industry standard implemented here on behalf of buyers with huge investments in their homes.

## Create a Trade-Friendly Environment



Sub-trade scheduling can be a tricky business if you're on a tight schedule. If you want the project to run smoothly, you will need to learn how to become well versed with the “order of things.” In other words, what trade comes in which order (see sidebar), how much time is required by each trade to complete their job, and what is required of you to facilitate the process?

Speak with each sub-contractor to determine how much time they will require and what they may need from you, such as hardwood to be delivered to site five days in advance so it can acclimate before install, or when to have plumbing & electrical fixtures on site, or when to supply appliance specs for cabinetry, lighting layouts for pot lights in the kitchen, and the list goes on. When you understand that process, only then will you begin to get a grasp of the overall project schedule.

Speaking from personal experience as a former sub-contractor of 15 years, one of the worst things you can do is mess up their scheduling, or pile them in on top of one another, which is frequently and unfortunately the case. Each sub-trade will come to the job site with a truck full of product and equipment that will need to be spread



out over a large area as they work. Some will show up with a team. If you try to bring in multiple trades at one time you can see how this would create mass confusion and a low tolerance for being in each other's way.

Don't forget, for tradespeople "time is money." If you put them in a rush situation all the time, or make it hard for them to do their job or make money, they will have no respect for you as a contractor, your job site, quality or scheduling. They will simply want out of that situation quickly, and that's even if they co-operate at all. Schedule them in a way that they can all have their own space for an appropriate amount of time to get the job done properly. The difference in attitude and professionalism will be astounding!

Keep a clean and tidy job site every day. This will promote organization, pride of workmanship, good attitudes and safety. Arrange for a waste bin, leave a broom, dust pan, vacuum, garbage bags etc. on site and encourage them to leave the site the way they found it when they walked in. This doesn't always work, so be prepared to get your hands dirty at the end of the day!

### Be Clear and Get It in Writing

I've said this before, and I can't say it enough. Get the quote in writing. It's a simple matter of avoiding miscommunication. Essentially, you're asking the question "What services and materials are you providing, and for what price?" You can even provide a written scope of work that you are asking for and ask them to sign it with the price. Don't leave it to memory. That doesn't work, and you will end up with a large "extras" invoice. Try to avoid hiring sub-trades by the hour; this is the equivalent of writing a blank cheque. These guys should be able to calculate time and material costs based off a simple scope of work request. Avoid putting yourself in the position of supplying materials; they will keep you running endlessly.

### Scheduling

Sub-trades frequently run behind schedule for many different reasons, so it can be hard to nail down a solid time frame weeks in advance. All I can say here is build in a little flexibility to your own schedule for this, communicate with your trades at least a week or so in advance to let them know when you will be ready for them, and when they can commit to a realistic start date for your project. Also, be sure to build in appropriate inspection delays from the city.

### Other Stuff

Throughout the process you can expect to be bombarded with questions, and you should possess the ability to make good common sense decisions under pressure on the fly. You will also find there are many jobs that seem to fall outside the parameters of the trades; these are the jobs that seem to be nobody's responsibility. Oh wait – you're the contractor, it's your job! 🏠

## THIS ISN'T JUST A PROGRAMMABLE THERMOSTAT.



It's savings in action.

Get \$10\* back for each programmable thermostat you buy and save hundreds of dollars in heating costs.

\*MUST MEET ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS.

TakeChargeNL.ca

take!  
CHARGE!

BROUGHT TO YOU BY

hydro  
a natcor energy company

NEWFOUNDLAND  
POWER  
A FORTIS COMPANY



**Don't miss an issue!**

Have Home & Cabin delivered to your door.

**\$9.95**/year (4 issues)

Or **FREE** with a Downhome magazine subscription (within NL only)

home  
& Cabin  
Life at its best

Subscribe online!

www.homeandcabin.ca

or call 1-888-588-6353 24 hours