

Optimizing the Facility Manager/ Project Manager Relationship on the Jobsite

by Andrew Dawson, Project Manager for Kirlin Builders

Facility Management Offices can sometimes double as the complaint department. Not from Facility Management themselves, but rather from their staff, building occupants, contractors, and even subcontractors. The Facility Manager's job is a true grind that a Project Manager should seek to relieve rather than add to. They, like you, have budgets, scheduling deadlines, punch lists, deficiency logs, and warranty items that need addressing and they have the burden of having to rely on their Prime Contractor, who in turn has to rely on their Subcontractor, to produce the desired result. Those degrees of separation translate to a lot of control lost on a project.

Fostering a productive relationship with your Facility Manager is paramount to a successful project. Sometimes it's easier said than done. Maybe the Facility Manager doesn't have a lot of time for you, there's a difference in personality, or there's an in-between Point of Contact who reports to the Facility Manager that has to accurately relay your information. Either way, it's critical to look at your project from all the vantage points - especially your Facility Manager - and create a working relationship that is built on trust and communication, even if you have little direct interaction with your Facility Manager.

Working in a Medical Setting

The key to being a Project Manager in an occupied medical setting is to be incredibly observant and listen. My experiences historically have involved very little face to face interaction with the Facility Manager in the active hospital. They are a vital behind the scenes function and

seek to stay that way. But when they do interact with you, they'll tell you what they expect. Don't try to change their expectations - change your own and they will come away with a favorable impression.

When overseeing construction in an active medical setting, make sure your presence is felt as your subcontractors are getting on with their day to day activities. Ensure hospital protocols (know them!) are being followed all the time - from infection control to dust control to removing demolished material - by your subcontractors, and never take shortcuts with those procedures. The tendency when working in medical settings is mistakes are magnified because they disrupt patient care - and effect operations. This will get your Facility Manager's attention in the wrong manner; hospitals can be tense work environments for everyone.

Communicate with your Facility Manager or their Point of Contact on a daily basis - *daily*. Even if the day's activities are minor. Keep them informed on the project. As informed as you are. This has to be your first priority as a Project Manager when cultivating a strong Facility Manager relationship. On top of communicating, be proactive with your deliverables. Give them your two week look ahead on your schedule, and always send them updates to that look ahead.

Change is inevitable when managing a job. There are so many variables outside of your control in a hospital that as Project Manager the best you can hope to do is adapt and do so in a positive manner. Just as important as being adaptive is being timely to your Facility Manager with your information. When you know the work you have scheduled for the day isn't going to be accomplish because of a hospital-related activity immediately notify the Facility Manager, tell them why the delay is happening, communicate with your subcontractor to determine how you'll make that lost time up, and relay that make-up plan to the Facility Manager in a

way that puts them at ease. Trust me - no matter how inconvenient this is to you, it's just as inconvenient to your Facility Manager. Understand his/her position and assure them you are on top of it.

When the Doctor Isn't In

Outside a hospital or medical clinic your access to the Facility Manager will be a lot greater, which will provide greater opportunity to build upon a productive Facility/Contractor relationship. My experience is that the non-healthcare settings are far more relaxed - less sick patients, less overburdened caregivers, etc. But, the professionalism still has to be maintained. There still is an end product that must be delivered on time and in budget, and you both will rely on one another to make sure the project succeeds.

As I stated before, Facility Managers can double as the complaint department or the company suggestion box, and that can be taxing. There are going to be days when your Facility Manager can be especially pointed in their feedback. My experience is to respect that position and understand it. Maybe a part of job isn't completed yet or there's a deficiency you noted on your log that's yet to have been addressed, or something small was overlooked like a missed paint spot. Maybe it's a bigger problem and you just overlooked it. Accept the criticism and thank them for pointing it out. The Facility Manager's interest is his or her facility; they are not out to get you or to test you, so don't take any feedback personally no matter how pointed it may be. Even if you were already in the process of addressing the comment - smile, accept it, thank them, and carry on. Make the relationship, the project, and the communication the priority. These criticisms are not personal.

Own the Adversity

Scheduling deadlines and project budgets are

daily worries among Project Managers, and the best way to keep your Facility Manager in the know and not question your motives is to keep the communication open and honest with them all the time - even when the news is not pleasant. This may sound easy and practical, but it's still stunning to me how often a Project Manager will stretch the truth to buy some time or cover up a small mistake only to see it exposed and have a small issue become a huge problem.

When I was Project Manager for several projects at the Building 2841 U.S. Army Medical Center School at Fort Sam Houston, Texas I was able to develop a great relationship with the Facility Management staff there because I was brutally honest with them about the project progress, and in turn they were brutally honest with me. It didn't always mean we liked what we had to say to one another, but we respected the honesty and accepted our responsibilities to one another. I let them know when work was wasn't progressing correctly and had to be altered; it occurred once on an office renovation project and there was an issue in regards to furniture delivery and installation. It was going to slightly delay the tenants moving back in, and although it was out of my control I got the delivery and install dates pinned down, relayed it to the Facility Manager to adjust the tenant move in date, and while it wasn't an ideal situation given how late in the project we had to adjust the schedule everything was delivered and installed and there was little inconvenience in the end. Part of what made this adversity easy to overcome is I avoided doing tasks at the last minute - including documentation. If Beneficial Occupancy is in jeopardy, as it was for this project, I let them know sooner rather than later.

CASE STUDY: Budge Dental Clinic

One of the best project I've ever done in my career is one of my biggest - the 44 chair Budge Dental Clinic at Fort Sam Houston. It was a project unlike any I'd ever done before, and it

was at a site I was relatively new to without many pre-existing relationships.

For this job we put a transition space together to temporarily house dental clinic operations there so we could finish the renewal as soon as possible. The day Budge moved into the temporary clinic I gave the Facility Manager, Officer in Charge, and Non-Commissioned Officer in Charge my personal number and let them know to call me anytime there was an issue as they arrived at the clinic, which was typically between 4:45am and 5:15am - almost three hours before work was to start each day.

They would call often before 5:30am and I would answer and respond right away. I never hesitated and was always ready to explain to them what they were observing, whether it was an issue, and if it was how and when I'd deal with it. It meant a lot of early trips to the jobsite, but I did it every single time they called me and it earned their trust and respect, which was instrumental in that project being completed on time and within budget - a project that exceeded \$15 Million in magnitude and 20,000 SF in project space. Once I received a call at 4:45am because their printer was not working. It wasn't a problem that was technically the responsibility of the Contractor, but I still went over there, assessed the issue, tinkered with a few settings, restarted it, and it amazingly started working. I could have passed that seemingly menial problem off and said it wasn't an issue of ours, but I wanted to go above and beyond to keep that strong FM/PM relationship going, and those little instances made a huge difference. I've enjoyed a fantastic working relationship at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio ever since, and was personally requested to be Project Manager on a second dental clinic at the base the following year.



Budge Dental Clinic - Fort Sam Houston, Texas

About the Author:

Andrew Dawson is a Project Manager for Kirlin Builders since 2007. A graduate of Virginia Military Institute, he currently is managing a health clinic renewal at Red River Army Depot in Hooks, Texas. For his efforts at Fort Sam Houston during the renewal of Budget Dental Clinic, Andrew was awarded the 2nd Quarter Operation Reward Safety award by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Fort Worth District and a Commander's Coin by the Fort Worth District for his efforts. Andrew can be reached at ADawson@jjkllc.com