How to Dramatically Reduce Construction Punch List Items

By: Ed Caldera | First Time Quality

Many contractors have a good reputation for delivering a quality product because they work very hard at fixing construction punch list items. The problem is — the number of punch items to fix never gets smaller. The best quality project management process focuses on reducing the number of punch items being found. If you eliminate your top 10 problems that produce punch items, the number of punch items and deficiencies that come up will be reduced dramatically.

Start with a Comprehensive Final Quality Assurance (QA) Inspection Checklist
You’ll need to start collecting data on what and how many issues are getting through your current process. The first step is to create a comprehensive final inspection, or a pre-closing checklist, and either enter the inspection information into a spreadsheet or use construction Quality Assurance/Quality Control (QA/QC) software to collect the information.

If you don’t already use checklists, you can start by creating a checklist that includes similar checks to what your most experienced inspector(s) currently visually inspect.

Include a heading and checkpoints for each main area being inspected. Put these in the order your inspectors typically work. For example, you can organize your checklist first by exterior and interior areas and then add rooms and areas within those broader categories.

Include instructions for taking pictures and adding notes. You want to have complete information so you can analyze this for improving your QA/QC process moving forward.

Add Inspections at Strategic Points
Review the data from your final inspections and find out where most problems have been occurring. For example, what areas did not have problems throughout the project, and what areas had problems that had to be corrected? This information will give you an idea of when to include additional inspections at strategic points within the construction process.

Focus on Team Performance
The next step, after you establish your milestone inspections, is to improve the quality of the work being done so fewer deficiencies occur. This is accomplished by setting quality expectations and increasing crew and subcontractor accountability.

Improving quality performance benefits the bottom-line of both the customer, your partners and your...
company. So, taking a positive approach and including your team in the planning of this process get you better results.

Work with your superintendents, crews and subcontractors to identify some well-known recurring issues that you want to eliminate. Create checklists of about 10 initial key check points to heighten awareness of these recurring issues (hotspots). You should have a checklist for each trade. Include pictures that show what you expect in quality performance.

Use these checklists to do your inspections and take note about the parts of the project that were right the first time and those that were not. Adding a scoring system helps quantify whether performance goals are being met.

Collect the data from your inspections and generate performance reports. Associate the inspection data to who or what company did the work. This information will tell you who does the best work and who does not.

Share the performance reports with your team. This will motivate them to catch any problems before you do. If you make your expectations clear from the beginning, there is no reason major problems should come up at the end. Your team should be finding and fixing their own deficiencies before you inspect their work. If they’re not, it’s because you’re not setting the right expectations.

Focus on Team Performance
After you implement milestone inspections and generate performance reports to encourage your team to be responsible for their own work, you should focus on using inspection data to continue to measure and improve quality.

There are three things to consider here:
1. **Analyze data.** Continue to run analysis reports on your inspection results that tabulate the data so you can understand what ‘hotspot’ issues are missed most often and target them for eradication.

2. **Add clear checkpoints for recurring issues.** Clearly communicate your expectations to eliminate recurring issues. You might even attach pictures of good work so they are available as a reference during inspections.
3. **Fine tune your process.** If you’re still seeing the same recurring issues during your final inspections, ask yourself why these deficiencies are getting missed by your team. Identify recurring issues that deserve special attention and then pick a hotspot deficiency for each trade. Each month, select a hotspot deficiency and provide training on your expectations.

You don’t need to be the only one that makes an effort to eliminate problems. Involve your team in the improvement process. Over time, this tactic should eliminate your biggest problems in each trade specialty. If you eliminate your top 10 problems, the number of deficiencies that come up will be reduced dramatically. This will result in a huge payback for both your company, team and customers.

**About the Author**
Ed Caldeira is the Founder & CEO of First Time Quality (FTQ), one of the construction industry’s leading quality experts. FTQ is one of FCA’s key quality partners.