

Dakota Report

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Dakota Builders, Inc.
Professional Remodelers

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WALK THROUGH: THE RELATIONSHIP

What our customer find frustrating, illuminating, right or wrong in the process of remodeling.



Its beautiful location inspired Harvey and Hadassa Morris to buy a house in a style they didn't especially like. They spent a year changing the decor and customizing the wiring.

Good "customer relations" is more than an ideal in remodeling. If we don't have it, things fall apart. That's certain death for a remodeling company. We count on our customers' referrals for about half of our activity.

Successful though we may be by industry standards (three out of four remodeling "firms" remain too small to even have a payroll), we know we're not perfect. We have at times been spread a little thin.

One of the areas of constant concern is communication. Because people in the crafts are doers more than talkers, we can easily neglect to tell you what is happening behind the scenes. And customers don't always tell us what they are thinking. That's why we are dedicating this issue of "Dakota Report" to clearing the air. The "case studies" below resulted from phone interviews.

GC for a Year

In the final stages of a whole house refinishing before they moved back in, Harvey Morris says he has felt like the General Contractor, on site every day, but one with no clout. "I had to be slapped up beside the head a few times for firing off emails to Greg and forgetting to go through my Lead Carpenter," he confesses.

While many problems occurred on this extremely complex project, he found Dakota's owner most responsive, accessible, and delivering closest to the promised timeline of the three remodeling firms he has dealt with over the years.

Harvey and his wife almost have made remodeling another career, as they have chosen three houses for their locations, knowing the structures themselves did

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SAHBA "Remodeler of the Year" 2005

Walk Through: The Relationship *continued*


not fit all their needs. By now they are pretty good at looking at any space and envisioning how things could be better. Harvey credits Hadassa with doing most of the work. She makes all the design, color, and finish decisions without outside help. He says he is "pretty good at figuring out where things will fit.

They didn't need an architect this time, but used Dakota's architectural design associate, Rick Herrington, to do the necessary drawings.

"It means this has been our job for a year, the first six months getting clear what we wanted, interviewing contractors, working with Rick, finding the right finishes, deciding cabinets and appliances. The second six months we have been supervising. It's all-consuming."

"When you get towards the end is when it gets toughest. You discover mistakes, your own and other's." Morris mentions his own error, putting together a list of all the electrical components they needed, but specifying one kind of finish for switches and another kind for outlets. When this was discovered they had to stop installation, return items and pay restocking charges. Then they paid premium prices purchasing the replacements through a retail source because the wholesale supplier takes longer.

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"If you are doing this with a partner, it takes a lot of good will for her not to say, 'you're a jerk.'"

The faulty cabinets were other people's mistakes that required two returns to the factory. Then the microwave oven blew out twice. It was due to too-much voltage, so the electrician paid for the new appliance.

What gave Harvey special satisfaction? It was inspired by a wry observation of a carpenter's assistant.

"One day we had a house full of people, many trucks in the driveway, four or five trades. Rick Jones said, "Gee, you're making a big payroll today!" Yes, I was spending a lot of money. But [put that way] it felt very good."

Time Out of My Hands

Pete and Diane Trinque had their master bath totally redesigned, fixtures moved around the room, windows added, and a shower installed behind a curved, glass block wall. We asked them, "What was the biggest shock during your remodeling?"

"In terms of disappointment, it was scheduling," Pete replied. "They told us it would take four weeks, and we had done enough remodeling previously to know that wasn't realistic, but we really didn't think it would take four months!"

"Also, we seemed to be managing the project ourselves, to the point where we were getting calls from the subcontractors." Looking back, he recognizes that Dakota was overwhelmed by growth during a personnel shortage, but at the time he felt he had to watch the process closely on details such as the placement of electrical outlets.

There was one serious miscommunication that affected timing. The plumbing supplies didn't get ordered on schedule. Somebody would have to pay extra for a rush order. Pete says he told his Lead



The traffic pattern in the master suite was improved by rearranging fixtures. A shimmering glass block shower wall added glamour. Plan by Herrington DAP.

Carpenter, 'It's not my problem.'"

In spite of all this, Trinque says, "I don't want these negative comments to overshadow the fact that we love the results and think the quality of the work was exceptional." He even enjoyed something about the process. "I enjoyed the trade contractors, their quality, our conversations, and interacting."

We asked, "How will you approach your next remodeling project differently?"

"I already have recommended Dakota Builders to friends, but always with the caveat about scheduling."

"If you had been told that the project would take four months, would you have chosen Dakota anyway?"

"I probably would have. After all, managing customers' expectations is huge. We do it all day [refurbishing commercial interiors]. I have to say that Dakota's quality stands up to the scheduling delays."

Her Turn Next



The family asked Dakota Builders to convert a garage space into an extra bedroom and bath (right).

Jennine Grogan thought their project went surprisingly fast once it got past the planning, which took longer than she had imagined.

"To tell the truth, I was too preoccupied to pay much attention," she recalls. Her job was taking care of a baby and a toddler. The most disturbing aspect of the construction — converting a garage to a new bedroom suite — was the dust.

"The remodeling was really Andrew's idea," she explains, adding that her husband made most of the decisions. She did enjoy picking out bathroom tile and felt a lot of satisfaction walking into the empty finished room, a "fresh canvas."

If they ever do it again, she will be more involved.

"I like to think a lot about something beforehand, and I will get lots of information to be prepared; I will know what I want in every detail."

The Agony of Process

It can be agonizing when a project is dogged by delays. Dakota took over work on one midtown addition that was already in deficit: the first contractor had been "booted." The lapse between contractors, and subsequent periods of relative inactivity, such as the wait for a new electrical line before the pad could be poured — added to the frustration.

"That's when a dribble of paint or a slightly crooked light switch becomes enormously annoying," says Dakota's president and owner, Greg Miedema.

"Quality in finishing is an ongoing concern, since many construction workers get their training

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The addition on December 13 was a shell and on January 17 was beginning to look like it belonged to the rest of the house.

Walk Through: The Relationship *continued*

on projects involving hundreds of houses that don't yet have owners. They are supposed to be getting the job done quickly. Remodeling, on the other hand, is custom work."

"The good news is that Dakota Builders Inc. has snagged five great new carpenters this quarter: Michael Magda, Tony Mendibles, Wes Heinrichs, Rodney Brown and Chris Pierce. With Billy Jones, Rick Chapman, Richard Hurlburt and myself, we have at least 140 years' hands-on, carpentry experience."



Tony Mendibles

"We've snagged five great new carpenters..."

-Greg Miedema



Wes Heinrichs



Michael Magda



Rodney Brown



Chris Pierce



Dakota Report

"Best Newsletter"
Pinnacle Marketing Award
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Each Dakota Builders project is assigned to one carpenter who is the Lead Carpenter and the on-site manager of day-to-day activities. Dakota's Project Manager, Richard Hurlburt, coordinates labor and materials for all projects. Here he helps Lead Carpenter Rick Chapman match a lumber order to its drawings.

Q & A: How can we get the stress out of remodeling?

We appreciate our customers for their honest feedback and insights into the "other" side of the remodeling experience. This is an important discussion that must be ongoing. Though we certainly can say that the past year has been a test – the amount of business across the construction industry has exceeded all expectations — we see even more demand ahead. Here are a couple of ideas always worth thinking about.

Do your shopping ahead of time.

We're glad to provide guidance, but our "Terms and Agreements" clearly states: "Owner agrees to make all selections prior to start." No one does, and it hurts. The World Wide Web makes it easy for you to learn more than we know about what new and non-standard products are out there, cutting edge design, high end fixtures, and environmentally friendly materials. When you decide what you want, be sure to find out about any special requirements for installation (and how to get replacement parts). Also, try to see samples. Order one special knob or one switch plate before we order dozens.

Have a Plan B.

Sometimes your preferred color or size is temporarily unavailable, but no specific time of availability can be promised. How much is it worth to you to wait — and wait? If it is a popular product we can probably locate it somewhere in the country, but before you count on something unique, like a hand-painted tile, and then discover the only painter is ill — it

happens — ask yourself, "What else do I like?"

Make sure we have the same calendar.

We estimate time for completion from the construction start date, and that will be months after our first meeting if we start with sketches and ideas. Scheduling all the trade contractors is the hardest part of our work. We can't just say, "Ask the electrician to come Thursday instead of Wednesday," and expect him to rearrange his other jobs to conform to your change. There's a domino effect, impacting all our other projects and trade contractors, causing more delays.

Expect surprises.

Remodeling is not only custom building, it is careful de-construction. We can't always predict until we open up a wall or a floor or ceiling just what we are dealing with. Polybutelene pipes of the 1980s tended to leak. Older metal can be too fragile to make good plumbing connections. The electrician may have to replace older parts. Even in almost-new construction, systems can be problematic.

Don't wonder, ask.

Frequent communication is extremely important in clarifying where we are headed in the days ahead. Above all, don't hold in worries and doubts until you are angry! We want your project to go well as much as you do. That's why we send you "in-progress surveys" every two weeks, asking for your concerns and guidance. On site, the Lead Carpenter is the person assigned to keep the lines open for communication. Still, as

a typical day unfolds with increasing urgency to interlocking activities, he may forget to warn who will be invading your castle the next day or mention that there's a pile of supplies in your alley. And you might forget to tell us that you are going out of town, or that you have a new dog. Our workday typically is 7:30 to 2:30. If you and the Lead don't usually cross paths, then feel free to call our office and Cindy Miedema will help you reach him or our Project Manager, Richard Hurlburt, or me. You can catch me quickly on email:

gam@dakotabuildersinc.com.



Richard Hurlburt



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Dakota News

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SAHBA Remodeler of the Year 2005



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Congratulations, Billy Jones!

This excellent craftsman and master of multi-tasking is the Dakota Builders Inc. "Carpenter of the Year." He's always had an eye for finished detail, but this year, working on a big, complex project, has demonstrated he can do anything, absorbing new knowledge and applying it perfectly.

Locally, we are building a workforce from the ground up with SAHBA Institute of Construction. The year-long training program has 50 students who attend classes two nights a week and spend 40 hours a week on jobsites with various contractors. They are paid minimum wage while gaining basic skills of plumbing, electrical, concrete, masonry, framing, finish carpentry and heating, ventilating and air conditioning. They may add drywall, stucco, insulation and painting. They learn about construction principles, building materials, blueprint reading, estimating, and construction management. Top students will find immediate employment in midlevel management paying about \$30,000 to start. See [www.sahba.org/careers/Institute of Construction](http://www.sahba.org/careers/Institute_of_Construction).

Congratulations, Dunn-Edwards! We are pleased to note that our paint supplier and Dakota Report sponsor was named "Supplier of the Year" by the Cornerstone Foundation (Southern Arizona chapters of the American Institute of Architects and Arizona Builders' Alliance).

Sandy Dunn flew into Tucson for a Home Builders Institute in March. The VP and Treas. of the National Association for Home Builders came a day early for a fundraiser with SAHBA; hosting luncheon with 20 SAHBA members, and a visit to the Fred Acosta Job Corps Center. This dynamic woman will be president of NAHB in 2008.

May is National Remodeling Month — and the people at the National Association of Home Builders called to tell me I'm featured as their May "Remodeler of the Month" in *Qualified Remodeler*. Now, back to work.

DBI has its first ICF project. Insulated Concrete Forms are energy efficient building blocks (using polystyrene foam) that range from R-17 to R-26, compared to wood frame walls, usually R-9 to R-15. Website info: NAHB Research Center (www.nahbrc.org) and Insulating Concrete Form Association (www.forms.org). One made in Tucson is Mikey Block (www.mikeybkock.com).



SAHBA President Ed Taczanowsky with SAHBA Chairman Greg Miedema, aka "2005 Remodeler of the Year."

Photo by Visual Images Productions.

I was wearing a tuxedo when they installed me as chair of SAHBA at our annual banquet on January 28. I had to give a speech. Although I have a long-standing reputation as the "joker" at meetings, I was entirely serious when I said that I am honored to be the first remodeler ever to be given this position in our growing local organization. Thank you, my colleagues, for seeing through my clown facade.





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