



# FOCUS ON THE FIELD

## PART 1 OF OUR TALENT SERIES



June 2023

# How Investing in Your Field Leaders Will Pay Large Dividends

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By Matthew Gierke and Ethan Cowles

A lack of skilled field leaders is a key risk for companies already struggling to fund and staff projects amid labor shortages, materials supply issues and economic uncertainty.

Foremen and field leaders are the most critical roles in a trade contractor's organization. They plan, coordinate and lead your teams to build and install work correctly the first time. A lack of skilled field leaders is a key risk for companies already struggling to fund and staff projects amid labor shortages, materials supply issues and economic uncertainty.

Of the [28.7 million](#) small businesses in the U.S., 40% are generating and managing less than \$100,000 annually. A single foreman or superintendent leading a crew of six craftworkers is likely managing between \$500,000 to more than \$1 million in labor every year. Given the shortage of skilled craftworkers and the risks to your projects, the need for world-class field leaders is undeniable.

Yet, investing in training and supporting field leaders is often overlooked or pushed aside. FMI frequently hears that your foremen and superintendents are so important on job sites that you don't have time to pull them out of the field, take time to train and develop them, or to engage them in project planning.

As a result, field leader training is often focused on getting the most out of minimal technical training offered by vendors or hoping leaders learn through painful project experiences, as opposed to proactively developing critical skills and behaviors like planning, communicating and leading productive field crews.



# Top Challenges for Field Leaders

FMI's recent [talent research](#) included feedback from more than 100 field leaders, superintendents and project managers, most of whom attended an FMI training program. These leaders reported their three greatest challenges (Exhibit 1).

1. Juggling unrealistic project schedules.
2. Difficulty staffing projects due to lack of skills and labor.
3. Balancing leading teams and executing work.

The first challenge is related to project schedules and the associated time to do the work. Project schedules in construction have become more and more compressed. FMI estimates that **over the past two decades, from start of design to construction completion, the average schedule duration for a warehouse has been compressed by as much as 12 months.**

The other two reported challenges are directly related to the availability of field talent – and the time needed to develop skilled crew members. Labor shortages were the second-most cited cause for project delays in the [2022 AGC/FMI Risk Survey](#), and according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the construction industry had only slightly more trade workers in July 2022 (7.7 million) than it had in January 2007 (7.6 million).

## Exhibit 1: Top Three Challenges Reported by Field Leaders



Source: FMI's 2023 Talent Study

Furthermore, two-thirds of CEOs surveyed for FMI's [second quarter 2022 Construction Industry Round Table](#) (CIRT) reported difficulties finding field managers. The shortfall predates the current environment and will continue to impact crews in the years to come.

It will take everyone in the company to address these difficulties, but it's almost certainly time to place a much higher priority on field leader training and development.

**Companies need to help field leaders develop skills in four critical areas.** These are:

1. Leading and coordinating field crews.
2. Planning weekly resource needs.
3. Managing productivity.
4. Communicating effectively.

**“As an industry, we don't invest in field leaders. What they [field leaders] do daily is leadership at its core, including building customer relationships, negotiating conflict, leading projects and teams, etc.**

**As a company, we have made a concerted effort to invest in our men and the women leading in the field.”**

**— Russ Becker, President and CEO, APi Group**

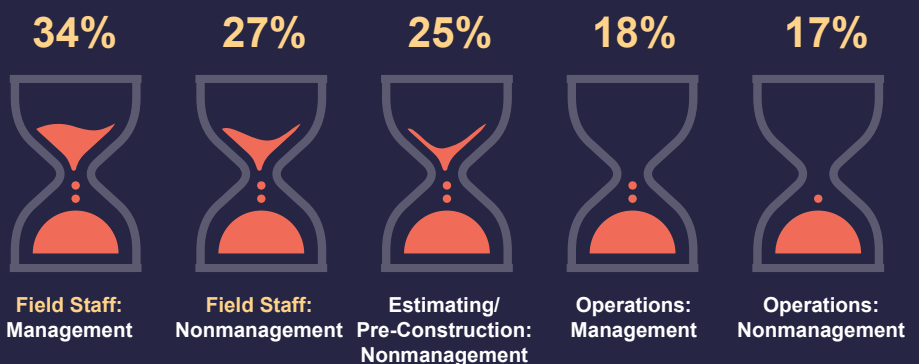
The difficult part is determining how to help your field leaders obtain the necessary skills to excel in these four tasks. Here are a few investments in your teams that will pay large dividends.

## Make Time for Training and Development in the Field

Many current leaders are in their third or fourth decade in the construction industry, and their experience is what generates success on their projects and in your company. These experienced field leaders are able to plan and execute jobs on compressed time frames while also leaving time for newer workers to ask questions, challenge approaches, take ownership of results and correct their errors. Qualified mentors are vital, in short supply and operating under massive time constraints.

“Everybody eventually is going to come across something that they've never had to do before,” says Seth Beckman, a project manager at Carlton Electric, Inc. “And the only thing you can do is get a hold of a person who has done it before and find out what was successful and anything that you really need to avoid in that situation.”

### Exhibit 2: Five Most Difficult Positions to Fill



Source: FMI's 2023 Talent Study

That depth of experience isn't built overnight and requires a combination of skills. Do it incorrectly, and you risk field manager [burnout](#). FMI's Project Manager Academy [research](#) has found that overwork, a lack of skills training and career support are primary culprits.

"We have to look and find people who have the knowledge and the ability to lead and understand the work that we're doing at the same time," says Stanley Lee, regional manager at Gregori Construction, Inc.

Give your field leaders time to train and develop their teams. It is unrealistic to expect that a skilled trade workforce will be built without dedicating time for training and tapping your most experienced field leaders to conduct training and share their knowledge and experiences. Build it into project timelines and into your organization's overall talent strategy, including roles, responsibilities and expectations.

## Focus on Planning and Resource-Related Delays

Think of a day on your job site when you had a field crew that was waiting, standing around or working on less productive tasks for more than an hour. What was the cause for this situation?

The primary way to improve field productivity and reclaim time on your job sites is by minimizing resource-related delays. The latter is caused by not having the right materials, tools, equipment or information in the hands of your field leaders at the time needed on the job site.

Field leaders and organizations can minimize resource-related delays through planning. A strong pre-job planning process and weekly look-ahead procedures will identify those items that are needed by field leaders to help them be productive and provide time for teaching, training and mentoring others instead of responding to daily and weekly fire drills.

Weekly look-ahead plans should be developed by your foremen or superintendents who identify critical tasks and activities planned for the next two or three weeks, including the manpower, material, tools, equipment and information required to do the job. It is then the organization's responsibility to ensure that the field leaders get what they need to install work correctly the first time.



It is imperative that you collaborate and engage with foremen and superintendents in planning the work both before the job starts and every week thereafter. They will build their planning muscles and, over time, will become better and better at recognizing what they need to be successful leading productive field crews. And providing your experienced field leaders with time to engage in training and development for themselves and others will be critical in this process.

## Train Field Leaders in Communication Skills

Often field leaders are technical experts who know how to build quality projects. But many lack soft skills, such as best practices around communication and how to motivate employees.

Your field leaders communicate with a broad range of project stakeholders, all of whom have different preferences and expectations for effective communication. Field leaders direct work for your field crews, send and receive direction from project managers and owners, and coordinate with other field leaders and other trade contractors. These diverse groups often have different communication preferences ranging, from face to face, email, written job status reports and text messages. They also have varying expectations for the level of detail they're given and when they're engaged in the process.

Teach your field leaders to listen to those with whom they interact and how to determine the best method for reaching them. Time management was cited as one of the top three challenges by field leaders surveyed, and communication failures underpin much of this stress. Understanding the best method for communicating and making decisions that will drive a project forward can help field leaders become more effective communicators and time managers.

## Leverage Field Mentorship

Experienced field leaders make quick decisions to maximize productivity and efficiency, but getting those with fewer years on the job the same level of expertise takes time and attention. One way to quickly help newer field leaders is by formally pairing them with a mentor.

Having someone who can quickly answer questions and offer advice helps field leaders develop the necessary experience and confidence in their decisions. Formal mentoring arrangements enable knowledge transfer and—as they gain proficiency and experience—ultimately allow more staff members to take ownership of projects. Mentoring can also serve as a crucial part of succession planning at different levels.

However, the lack of formal training programs in the past means that senior leaders may not be skilled at teaching inexperienced workers. This can be addressed with [leadership training](#) for those with valuable job knowledge and ongoing skills training as people progress in the field.

## How to Help Your Field Staff Succeed

A field leader's job is complicated and challenging. Prioritize time for field leader training by minimizing resource-related delays on the job site. Focus on soft skills and communication, and leverage mentors to grow new world-class field leaders.

Companies that invest in field leaders can lower business risk by building a deep pipeline of strong talent, enhance their ability to execute on projects, increase employee engagement and organizational loyalty, and improve field leaders' ability to take on greater responsibility. Now is the time to act and build your leaders of the future.

## RESEARCH TEAM AND AUTHORS



**Matthew Gierke** empowers contractors, construction equipment managers, materials manufacturers and distributors with winning strategies to maximize growth, profitability and overall improvement through non-incremental change. His work centers on building winning market strategies, developing effective change management programs, and improving each business's development and project management capabilities. Matt can be reached at [matthew.gierke@fmicorp.com](mailto:matthew.gierke@fmicorp.com).



**Ethan Cowles** has worked with both general and self-performing contractors helping them develop a strong understanding of the financial risks and rewards inherent to operational issues. Ethan helps these contractors consistently build a sense of project control, maximize productivity and minimize risk by implementing proactive management processes. Ethan's trade knowledge and management experience help to identify problems and offer meaningful solutions. Ethan can be reached at [ethan.cowles@fmicorp.com](mailto:ethan.cowles@fmicorp.com).



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## CONTACT US

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**RALEIGH HEADQUARTERS**  
223 S. West Street  
Suite 1200  
Raleigh, NC 27603



919.787.8400

[fmicorp.com](http://fmicorp.com)

## OFFICES

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Denver  
44 Cook Street  
Suite 900  
Denver, CO 80206  
303.377.4740

Houston  
1301 McKinney Street  
Suite 2000  
Houston, TX 77010  
713.936.5400

Tampa  
4300 W. Cypress Street  
Suite 950  
Tampa, FL 33607  
813.636.1364