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PLUS:

- Construction Safety Week Focuses on Empowering Healthy Connections at Work
- Is Firefighting Embedded in Your Company Culture?



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IS **FIREFIGHTING** EMBEDDED IN YOUR COMPANY CULTURE?



By Trudy Shay Petty
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Work is at a standstill. The team is waiting for the owner to approve a change order and the crew for one of the subs, who someone forgot to call, just arrived. You reached out to the owner to learn he is on vacation and not accessible. Heavy rains are predicted, and you are already behind schedule. Completing the project on time is what this owner cares about the most so there is an urgency to prevent the owner from getting more upset.

Sound familiar? Unfortunately, this type of situation where things happen unexpectedly and escalate with potentially costly consequences occurs often in all types of organizations and especially in the fast-paced, schedule-driven construction industry. This is “firefighting” at its best where a situation that could have been prevented demands an immediate solution. In my scenario, with no clear way to put the escalated problem or “fire” out, what happens next is a flurry of activity involving several people at the company trying to determine how to best use the subs today and tell the owner later about why the project is again off track. You are now in a panic and forced to move into damage control mode.



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Learn to anticipate problems before they happen where your focus and resources are on problem prevention.

Firefighting in the Construction Workplace

What I have found over the years in my work with commercial contractors is they are particularly adept at “firefighting.” I often see the very same situations and problems occurring across different companies in the office and field that reach the “fire” stage with many of the same problems reoccurring. Unsolved problems or those not prevented can easily escalate into “fires” requiring constant firefighting.

In my interviews with construction personnel, many cite an ability to put out fires as one of their strengths. They often mention the adrenaline

rush they get moving from one crisis to another. Some boast about getting lots of practice in putting out fires that makes them better firefighters. Company employees during business planning sessions often use the word “firefighting” to describe their work environment—in these instances, it is not a compliment. When asked to explain, responses include “too much reliance on putting out fires at the expense of getting better at upfront planning, communication and problem solving.”

Contractors might want to ask themselves two relevant questions: (1) Is firefighting the norm at your company and how your staff operates

on a daily basis, and (2) Is being a good firefighter the type of performance your company rewards? If the answer to one or both questions is yes, it increases the likelihood that firefighting is embedded in your company culture. The most effective problem solvers learn to anticipate problems before they happen where their focus and resources are on problem prevention.

Symptoms of Chronic Firefighting

In Roger Bohn's classic article *Stop Fighting Fires* appearing in the Harvard Business Review, he lays out the symptoms of firefighting that can derail an organization. For contractors, a useful exercise is to assess if any of these symptoms are occurring at your company and to what extent:

- No time to solve all problems
- Solutions are incomplete
- Problems recur and cascade
- Urgency supersedes importance
- Many problems escalate into crises
- Performance over time degrades

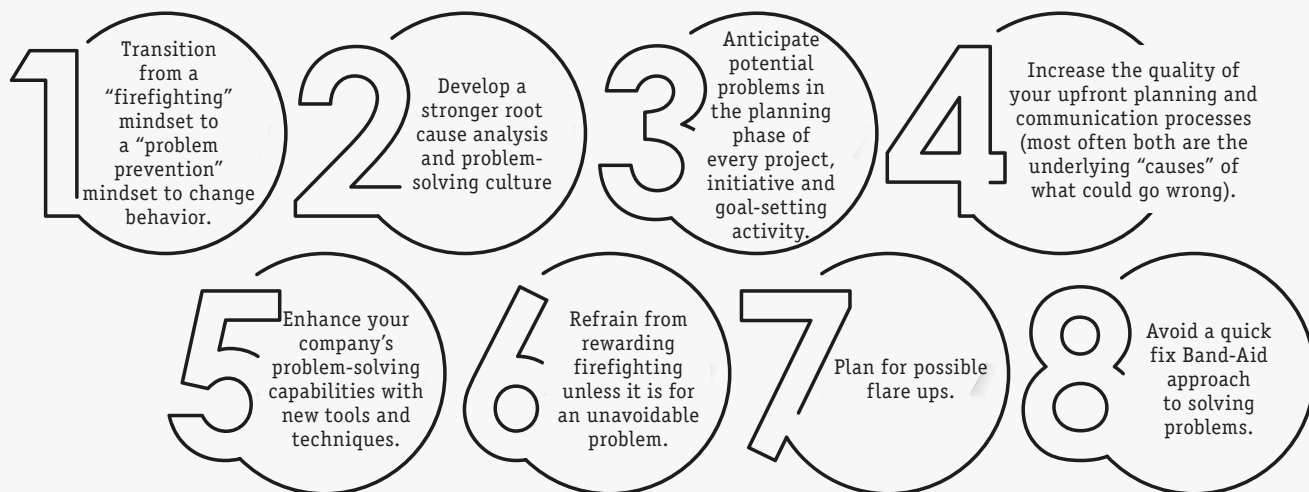
It is a proven fact that chronic firefighting is an unproductive and wasteful activity that can consume a company's resources, is ineffective and highly stressful to those involved. As Jimmy Leppert at Kotter International in his 2013 Forbes magazine article says, "Reward firefighting and you'll create a culture of arsonists."

FIREFIGHTING ASSESSMENT- STARTING THE CONVERSATION

A few questions for your management team and employees to consider:

1. To what extent are we fighting fires in our office and on our jobsites? Do we see the same fires reoccurring?
2. Can we avoid or prevent some or all of the fires we are putting out from happening in the first place, and if so, how?
3. Do we reward firefighting behavior and celebrate "heroes" who put out the biggest fires?
4. Are we spending more of our time and valuable resources on what is "urgent" vs "important"?
5. How often are we operating in a damage control mode in order to minimize the impact of something that has already gone wrong?
6. What can we "Start doing, Stop doing and Keep doing" to develop a stronger problem-solving culture and "problem prevention" mindset?

ACTIONS TO STOP OR REDUCE FIREFIGHTING



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ANTICIPATING PROBLEMS & PLANNING

Goal: To build and complete the owner's project by the agreed to date

<u>What Could Go Wrong</u>	<u>Priority</u>	<u>Possible Causes</u>	<u>ACTIONS</u>	
Owner doesn't sign change orders in timely fashion	High	1) Didn't explain owner's role impacting schedule 2) Didn't establish and agree on change order process up front 3) Didn't ask to be apprised of owner's schedule and travel plans	<u>To Prevent It</u> 1) Spell out for the owner how their prompt reply impacts completing project on time 2) Increase coordination, collaboration and face to face meetings with owner 3) Review owner's calendar for changes during two week look ahead scheduling	<u>To Minimize The Effect</u> 1) Extend completion date 2) Find another way to make up lost time

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Anticipate Problems in Your Planning Process

Most "fires" before they ever get to the firefighting stage can be prevented or avoided by "anticipating problems" where what could occur is identified early in the planning phase of any initiative or project. This technique used by the best problem solvers will ask the question "what could go wrong" (also called negative brainstorming). Unless you legitimize asking the question this way as part of your company's problem solving process, too often it can come across negative or you can be accused of thinking the worst of someone before something goes wrong.

This "anticipating problems" exercise allows a company to strategically

think through and prioritize what issues or problems could occur and then you are in a better position to identify and implement proactive, preventative actions against the root causes of what could go wrong. A measurable result is much less firefighting with an emphasis on problem prevention.

Using my opening scenario, see the top of page 14 for a partial look at how the process works.

On the Bright Side...

Contractors who embrace lean construction practices do less firefighting than other companies, especially in the field. This is due to more upfront project planning, collaboration and communication of all stakeholders involved in the construction delivery

process. They are also on the look-out for any disruptions to continuous workflow and ways to reduce or eliminate waste.

For the contractor who is committed to continuous improvement, getting better at problem-solving and decision-making is often a top business priority that includes doing a better job of anticipating problems and problem prevention. When firefighting is the rule at your company and not the exception, it is a source of tremendous waste. ■

Trudy Petty is owner of Petty and Associates, a Texas-based management consulting firm. A trained facilitator in total quality management and licensed instructor of a nationally-acclaimed "Problem Solving & Decision Making" course, Trudy is committed to helping AEC companies enhance their effectiveness and performance. Her work with clients across the U.S. includes AGC Chapters, the American Council for Construction Education and other industry groups. Contact Trudy at 214.476.5220 or trudy@pettyandassociates.com.