THE FIELD DECK · FROM 34 CONVERSATIONS

THE EXEC AND OWNER EDITION

Each one cost somebody a project, a client, or a career. Each card carries what it cost, the exact words of the person who paid it, and the move to make next time. Grouped by the situation you are in, not by theme.

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02 / THE OWNER MEETING · WALKING INTO THE ROOM

02

SUPERS | PMS | EXECS & OWNERS | EP 054

Lead with the answer. 'This part is behind because of X, here is what we do about it.' Then earn the Gantt chart.

Libby Magliolo spent over a decade building presentations at PwC and Southwest Airlines before founding The Slide Master and teaching SMU Cox MBAs to present. At Southwest, you could not even get on the executive team's calendar without declaring whether your presentation was an inform, a discuss, or a decide. She teaches that most updates are structured like murder mysteries, context and background building to a reveal, when audiences give you maybe 30 good seconds of attention and communication should work like a newspaper article with the headline first. For an OAC meeting that means opening with one sentence, this part of the project is running behind due to XYZ and here is what we need to do about it, and only flipping to the Gantt chart when someone asks.

> "Lead with the answer. Don't walk me through the process that you walked through to get to the answer. Give me the answer and then walk me through the process."
>
> LIBBY MAGLIOLO · 13:30

THE MOVE Open every update with the one-sentence headline: what is behind, why, and what you are doing about it. Keep the Gantt chart and the backup detail in reserve for when the room asks.

LIBBY MAGLIOLO · FOUNDER, THE SLIDE MASTER · HEAR IT AT 13:30 →

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EXECS & OWNERS   EP 029

Pricing preconstruction too cheap can lose you the job. One owner rejected a GC for exactly that reason.

Jeremy Crumley, Preconstruction Director at Balfour Beatty, watched his team lose a pursuit for a reason that would have been unthinkable a decade ago: the owner told them their preconstruction services were priced too cheaply. The market has shifted, and owners increasingly read the precon fee as a signal of how much effort and value they are buying rather than expecting it as a free loss leader. Being the cheapest number on that line signaled the least effort, and it cost the firm the job. The lesson runs against every instinct to buy work with free precon.

> "We were actually not awarded a project because the owner told us they thought our pre-construction services were too cheap."
>
> JEREMY CRUMLEY

THE MOVE Price preconstruction to reflect the actual effort and value of the work, and present it as a professional service. A real precon fee wins jobs that a free line item loses.

JEREMY CRUMLEY · PRECONSTRUCTION DIRECTOR, BALFOUR BEATTY · HEAR IT →

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EXECS & OWNERS   EP 027

On the owner side you do not call the shots. You ask leading questions until the GC arrives at the solution itself.

Tim Straub started as a superintendent at Whiting-Turner building data centers, then crossed to the owner side as a Senior Technical Program Manager at Google responsible for construction quality and commissioning. The move taught him that the presumption that owners call the shots is a fallacy: on the owner side you lead through influence, asking leading questions that help the GC arrive at the solution itself rather than prescribing it. That takes respecting that other GCs win with different means and methods than the ones he grew up with, and adapting his approach to the distinct cultures of iron workers, electricians, and GC teams. Command-and-control from the owner's chair simply does not get the work done.

THE MOVE When you sit on the owner side, drop the directive. Ask leading questions until the contractor arrives at the solution themselves, and respect their means and methods once they do.

TIM STRAUB · SENIOR TECHNICAL PROGRAM MANAGER, GOOGLE · HEAR IT →

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EXECS & OWNERS

EP 024

An owner who can explain exactly what changed after a fatality may be safer than a contractor with a clean record.

David Tibbetts, Chief Safety Officer at Highwire, points to an uncomfortable gap: recordable injury rates have dropped 80 percent in 30 years, yet construction fatalities have sat near 1,000 a year with no discernible decrease for 15 to 20 years. That is why Highwire weights EMR at just 10 percent of its prequalification score and treats no single data point, not a fatality history, not an OSHA citation, as an automatic disqualifier. A contractor who had a fatality and can clearly articulate what happened, what was learned, and what systems changed may have a more mature safety culture than one whose clean recordable rate is masking unaddressed exposures. The risk signal's job is to start that conversation, not end it.

> "There is no result of a prequalification assessment... that should automatically disqualify a contractor. It is a risk insight."
>
> DAVID TIBBETTS

THE MOVE When a prequalification flag appears, schedule the conversation instead of pulling the trigger: ask what happened, what the company learned, and what changed, and weigh the quality of that answer more than the flag itself.

DAVID TIBBETTS · CHIEF SAFETY OFFICER, HIGHWIRE · HEAR IT →

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PMS | EXECS & OWNERS | EP 007

It is not the guy in the trailer that builds the job. Make young PMs lay block and walk steel so they respect the craft.

At Barton Malow, Rener co-created a program called Building Skills that sent young project managers to school for a day, once a month or every other month across the 16 CSI divisions, to physically do the trade work. One engineer proudly took an hour to lay a single perfect block and was told you cannot lay one block an hour; others placed yards of concrete, framed small sheds, and walked steel at the ironworkers training center. The point was humility, understanding why a plasterer with 20 years of experience makes the work look effortless. A degree does not put the work in place, and without genuine appreciation for the trades it just gets you chased back into the trailer.

> "We want you to appreciate what these tradespeople do, and it takes a while to get good at what they do. If not for them, the jobs don't get built. It's not the guy in the trailer that builds the job."
>
> ANDREW RENER · 12:28

THE MOVE Put young PMs and estimators through real trade work, laying block, placing concrete, walking steel, early in their careers, so they manage from respect for the craft instead of a title in the trailer.

ANDREW RENER · EXECUTIVE, ARCHITECTURAL METALS · HEAR IT AT 12:28 →

05

PMS | EXECS & OWNERS | EP 053

Deliberately recruit your loudest known detractor into the pilot so objections surface before the enterprise rollout.

Elliot Christiansen ran the Trunk Tools rollout at Cleveland Construction as a sequence of pilots: a first trunk text pilot on a job already 75 percent complete with messy data and staff turnover, then three more pilots on three jobs under three different project executives to widen the sample. When he staffs a pilot he deliberately mixes demographics and seats two known quantities, a future champion who can help train project teams later, and the person he knows will hate the change. The detractor tells him everything wrong with the tool, and Elliot carries that list back to the tech company to work through while still in the pilot stage. By the time a tool goes enterprise-wide across the roughly 120 people in Cleveland's GC division, the loudest objections have already been flushed out.

> "I usually do try to pick somebody that I know probably will hate change, he'll probably hate doing this, but I'm gonna get him involved in the pilot because he's gonna tell me all the things that are wrong with it."
>
> ELLIOT CHRISTIANSEN · 32:18

THE MOVE Name your loudest skeptic to the pilot team on day one and route every complaint straight to the vendor while the deployment is still small. Save your champions for training duty at rollout.

ELLIOT CHRISTIANSEN · SVP OPERATIONS, CLEVELAND CONSTRUCTION · HEAR IT AT 32:18 →

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PMS | EXECS & OWNERS | EP 040

Never introduce a new tool and a new process in the same rollout. One is change management; both is a multi-year slog.

Aaron McClellan runs construction technology at Granite Construction, where every candidate solution goes through a build versus buy evaluation. Security comes first, with Granite's IT department running cybersecurity analysis because the company does federal work. Then the team evaluates the process itself and matches the solution to the existing process, specifically so they do not have to go through massive change management. A new technology is already one piece of change management on its own; introduce a new technology and change the process at the same time and you are talking about a very long adoption. The guiding question is whether they can get the tool to operations as fast as possible with as little change as necessary.

> "If you introduce a new technology, that's already one piece of change management that has to happen. So if you start introducing a new technology and changing the process, you're talking a long time."
>
> AARON MCCLELLAN · 9:45

THE MOVE Map the candidate tool against your existing process before you buy, and pick the option that changes only one variable. If the tool truly requires a new process, run the process change as its own separate rollout.

AARON MCCLELLAN · CONSTRUCTION TECHNOLOGY MANAGER, GRANITE CONSTRUCTION · HEAR IT AT 9:45 →

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PMS | EXECS & OWNERS | EP 022

Distrust any vendor claim of hours saved per week. Those are hours 41 to 50, not the hours that matter.

John Riggs, a Senior Project Manager at Suffolk, has grown numb to vendor marketing that promises hours saved per week, because the hours a tool saves are rarely the hours that matter on a jobsite. With project lifespans running two to four years, even piloting a product across 20 jobsites cannot produce real success metrics quickly, so claims about how many projects a tool has been used on and how well it worked deserve skepticism on their face. His warning to vendors is that overselling to get in the door guarantees disappointment on the job, and his own rule is that innovation should be judged on iteration, where five near-misses and a sixth-try success is the right aim.

> "We saved you 10 hours a week on average. I don't know if you will. Those are probably hours 41 to 50. Or 61 to 70."
>
> JOHN RIGGS

THE MOVE Ask every vendor how long and on how many completed projects their metrics were actually measured, and evaluate the tool on whether it removes the hours that matter, not the total it claims to save.

JOHN RIGGS · SENIOR PROJECT MANAGER, SUFFOLK · HEAR IT →

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PMS | EXECS & OWNERS | EP 053

Require usage dashboards from every vendor, because people will tell you they use the tool when the data says zero.

On a site visit Elliot asked one of his Cleveland Construction superintendents how the new Trunk RFI tool was working, and the super said he thought they had asked it twelve questions the other day. Elliot called his Trunk Tools rep, pulled the usage report for that job, and found the superintendent had personally asked zero; other people's questions added up to the twelve. He called the super back and told him to start asking questions. That is why Cleveland now requires every software vendor to provide usage dashboards, either standing access or regular reports from the back end, so he can verify teams are actually using what the company pays for instead of relying on self-report.

> "I've made a conscious effort of making sure that all of the people that we work with will provide us usage dashboards on a regular basis."
>
> ELLIOT CHRISTIANSEN · 34:17

THE MOVE Write usage reporting into every software contract before you sign: standing dashboard access or a scheduled export from the vendor's back end. Check it against what teams tell you, and follow up on the zeros.

ELLIOT CHRISTIANSEN · SVP OPERATIONS, CLEVELAND CONSTRUCTION · HEAR IT AT 34:17 →

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EXECS & OWNERS

EP 013

Do not bring in another point solution unless it eliminates two or three existing ones. Otherwise you just added a login.

Hannu Lindberg leads construction technology at DPR Construction in an industry littered with point solutions, each purpose built for one of the roughly 150 processes a project has to manage. Every added app is another place to administer information, another potential data bottleneck, and another application some poor superintendent has to log into. His filter at DPR, one his teams are probably tired of hearing, is that a new tool must eliminate two or three existing solutions and be more comprehensive and integrated. He even jokes that the real business idea is a fund that buys every point solution in a single workflow and simply makes them work together under one brand.

> "Don't bring in just another point solution. Bring in something that's going to eliminate two or three other solutions. Find something that is more comprehensive, more integrated."
>
> HANNU LINDBERG · 24:16

THE MOVE Before approving any new tool, name the two or three existing solutions it will retire. If it only adds another login, another data bottleneck, and another place to administer information, pass.

HANNU LINDBERG · TECHNOLOGY LEADER, DPR CONSTRUCTION · HEAR IT AT 24:16 →

06

PMS | EXECS & OWNERS | EP 028

Only automate a task that is both repetitive and annoying. If it is not annoying, let your people keep doing it.

Sarah Buchner started as a carpenter at 12 and spent 15 years in the field before a fatality on her Berlin high-rise pushed her into construction software, where she founded Trunk Tools. Her triage rule for construction companies is a two-part test: only automate work that is both repetitive and annoying. If a task is not repetitive, AI will struggle to get good at it, and if it is not annoying, people actually enjoy doing it and should keep it. By her count roughly 80 percent of white-collar construction workflows fail the necessity test, but even there she designs agents like her submittal agent to do the bureaucratic 95 percent while leaving the final call to the human, because fully automating those steps means the industry forgets how to do them within five to ten years.

> "If a task is repetitive and annoying, you should throw AI against it. Because if it's not repetitive, it's probably going to be hard to make an AI really good at it."
>
> DR. SARAH BUCHNER

THE MOVE Run every automation candidate through the two-question filter: is it repetitive, and is it annoying. If it fails either test, leave it with your people, and when you do automate, keep the decision in human hands.

DR. SARAH BUCHNER · FOUNDER AND CEO, TRUNK TOOLS · HEAR IT →

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EXECS & OWNERS EP 034

One retiring veteran takes five new hires to replace. The real labor shortage is knowledge leaving, not bodies missing.

Angelo Suntres, Director of Operations at Matina, an MEP contractor, argues the labor crisis is misdiagnosed: roughly 400,000 workers retire from the industry each year against about 100,000 apprentices completing programs, and of the 250,000 or so who start an apprenticeship only 30 to 35 percent finish. Worse, one experienced worker carries productivity it takes about five new entrants to replace, so the real gap is knowledge walking out the door, not empty seats. His conclusion is that finding bodies will not be the hard part; transferring knowledge into those bodies to make them useful will be. He is even building a mentorship matching and lessons learned tool himself, having systematized 372 items from his own field logbook.

> "I don't think finding bodies is going to be an issue, but transferring the knowledge to put into those people to make them useful is going to be the real challenge."
>
> ANGELO SUNTRES · 4:11

THE MOVE Plan for five new hires of productivity behind every retiring veteran, and start capturing their knowledge now: pair them with new entrants and get their lessons learned out of their heads and into a searchable system before they leave.

ANGELO SUNTRES · DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS, MATINA · HEAR IT AT 4:11 →

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PMS | EXECS & OWNERS | EP 035

The real AI risk is not security. It is someone shipping the first draft as the final draft.

Hugh Seaton, founder of The Link, has read plenty of corporate AI policies, and almost all of them obsess over security, which he calls the least of a contractor's worries. The bigger danger is the easy button: AI gives great demos, cannot answer concisely, and knows nothing about your specific job. It hands back a first draft of an answer, and people who ship that draft as the final product are the ones who get their companies in trouble. His prescription for GC leadership starts small: get your arms around the chatbots your people are already using and train them to prompt and to review.

> "It doesn't know what's going on in your job. It doesn't have any judgment like a human would. It's going to give you a first draft of an answer, and if people treat that like a final draft, they're going to get in trouble."
>
> HUGH SEATON · 9:38

THE MOVE Rewrite the AI policy around review, not just data security. Train teams on prompting, and make it a rule that every AI output is a first draft that gets human judgment applied before it goes out the door.

HUGH SEATON · FOUNDER, THE LINK · HEAR IT AT 9:38 →

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EXECS & OWNERS   EP 030

Do not automate the tasks that train your people. The PE walking the site with a camera is learning the job.

Michael Zeppieri, VP of Digital Solutions at Skanska USA, came up through West Point and Boeing, and he borrows a military insight: mundane, repetitive tasks build muscle memory. The project engineer walking the site with a camera is not just taking photos, they are learning the ebb and flow of the job, and a photo robot that takes over the walk removes exactly the development that was making that person better. His warning is that automating those tasks is an easy mistake because the ROI math never accounts for the training value. Which tasks get protected from automation has to be a deliberate decision, not a byproduct of whatever a vendor happens to sell.

> "You can very easily make the mistake of automating the things that are actually making your people better."
>
> MICHAEL ZEPPIERI

THE MOVE Before automating any task, ask what the person doing it is learning. Keep a deliberate list of developmental tasks you will protect even when a robot could do them cheaper.

MICHAEL ZEPPIERI · VP OF DIGITAL SOLUTIONS, SKANSKA USA · HEAR IT →

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PMS | EXECS & OWNERS | EP 056

When you try to automate a process you discover how much unpriced judgment the 'not that bright' guy was adding.

Hugh Seaton, founder of The Link and now an AI strategy consultant to contractors, pushes back on human in the loop as a throwaway phrase that usually means automate everything and stick an approval at the end. In his experience you cannot automate as much as you think, and the attempt is exactly what reveals how much unpriced judgment people add, including the guy nobody rates as bright. Pull those people out of the process and you do not just take a little pain later, you introduce brand new risk that nobody budgeted. His frame for leadership is to treat expertise as a strategic asset: figure out what it is, capture it, and elevate people rather than skim tasks.

> "When you try to automate a thing, you realize how smart people are. Even the guy that you don't think is that bright is adding a ton of value in the process. If you pull people out of it, you introduce new risk."
>
> HUGH SEATON · 9:36

THE MOVE Before automating any process, map the judgment the humans inside it are quietly adding and price the new risk of removing them. Capture and elevate that expertise instead of just deleting the headcount.

HUGH SEATON · FOUNDER, THE LINK · HEAR IT AT 9:36 →

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SUPERS | PMS | EXECS & OWNERS | EP 030

An LLM does not know it is wrong and wants to please you, so it will build your confidence on the wrong path.

Michael Zeppieri of Skanska USA, who came to construction from systems engineering at West Point and software at Boeing, names a specific operational hazard in the industry's rush to chat-based AI. An LLM does not know when it is wrong, and it is built to please you, so instead of correcting a flawed plan it reinforces it, building your confidence that you are on the right path. That turns the tool into a confirmation bias machine at exactly the moment you think you are checking your judgment. For anyone using a chatbot to pressure-test a construction decision, the agreeable answer is the one to distrust most.

> "Not only does it not know it's wrong, it wants to please you, so it actually builds your confidence that you're on the right path... in many ways it's confirmation bias."
>
> MICHAEL ZEPPIERI

THE MOVE Treat an LLM's agreement as a warning sign rather than validation. Force it to argue against your position, and verify any consequential call with a person who knows the work.

MICHAEL ZEPPIERI · VP OF DIGITAL SOLUTIONS, SKANSKA USA · HEAR IT →

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EXECS & OWNERS EP 037

Experienced workers' knowledge is walking out the door and there are roughly five years left to capture it digitally.

Mark Fly's urgency about knowledge capture has nothing to do with the technology and everything to do with the retirement clock. He wants to reach boomers and veterans leaving the industry and give them ways to release their knowledge before it is gone, pairing that capture with mentorship for the young workers coming up. On the show he and Stephen sketched what it could look like, from digitizing a career into an AI twin of an expert like Mark himself to gamified scenario walkthroughs through the CSI divisions. His window is explicit: with the knowledge leaving the field now, the next five years are when it gets captured or lost.

> "With the knowledge leaving the field, capturing that now for over the next five years is crucial."
>
> MARK FLY · 46:50

THE MOVE Start structured capture with your retiring field veterans now: recorded scenario walkthroughs, mentorship pairings, and digitized decision knowledge, while they are still on the payroll.

MARK FLY · PRODUCT EVANGELIST AND CONSTRUCTION TECH ADVISOR · HEAR IT AT 46:50 →

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EXECS & OWNERS

EP 047

If you are doing the innovator's job right, today could be your last day. You cannot protect your job and ask hard questions.

After his run as Director of Innovation at Swinerton, Aaron Anderson concluded that the innovation role only works if risk tolerance, including the willingness to be fired, is written into the job description. Doing the job right means asking the hard questions that make an organization uncomfortable, and you cannot ask them while simultaneously protecting your seat. He pairs this with his diagnosis of epistemic distance: people trust their own intentions and nobody else's, so an innovator who plays it safe never earns the standing to show anyone a different way. He applies the same verdict to the whole industry, which quashes curiosity in the name of fundamentals and kills its next generation of innovators.

> "I need to be willing and accept that if I'm doing my job right as an innovator, that this could be my last day. You can't protect your job and ask hard questions."
>
> AARON ANDERSON

THE MOVE If you hold an innovation role, write risk tolerance into it explicitly, including your willingness to lose the job. Ask the hard question even when it threatens your seat, or admit you are not doing the work.

AARON ANDERSON · FORMER DIRECTOR OF INNOVATION, SWINERTON · HEAR IT →

04

EXECS & OWNERS | FOUNDERS | EP 041

Nobody builds 30 percent cheaper on a cost-plus contract. Adoption fails on incentives, not technology.

When industry-agnostic investors ask KP Reddy why construction is so backwards, the Shadow Ventures founder tells them it is not the tech, it is incentive alignment. AE firms run on billable hours, a labor arbitrage model inherited from the days when firms charged separately for CAD time and then for BIM time, and GCs pass tools like Procore straight through to the job, so technology that shrinks the billable base has no sponsor. He told one site-planning startup that the terrible plans developers submit to permitting are not a quality problem at all: submitting to the city is a payment milestone that unlocks the first construction draw for a developer who has been out of pocket and a civil engineer sitting on hundred-day receivables. Until the business model rewards building cheaper, no amount of technology changes behavior.

> "I don't think it's tech. I think it's incentives, incentive alignment. If a contractor used all this tech and AI and could build a building 30 percent cheaper, there's no incentive to do that."
>
> KP REDDY · 2:56

THE MOVE Before piloting any efficiency tool, trace who currently gets paid for the hours it would eliminate. Fix the billing model first, or pick tools whose savings land on your own margin instead of inside someone else's billable base.

KP REDDY · MANAGING PARTNER, SHADOW VENTURES · HEAR IT AT 2:56 →

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EXECS & OWNERS | FOUNDERS | EP 047

Three percent margin turned over twelve billing cycles is a thirty percent return on capital. Pitch against that, not the margin.

As former Director of Innovation at Swinerton, Aaron Anderson watched productivity software pitch itself against construction's famous 3 percent margin and miss the real economics. On a $100M project a GC has roughly $15M of working capital deployed, and that 3 percent margin turns over 8 to 12 billing cycles a year, which compounds to roughly a 30 percent return on capital. That return is the hurdle rate any new tool or business model actually has to clear, which is why he argues disrupting a GC takes something like $100M of patient cash on a balance sheet, not an army of software engineers. Software aimed at shaving the 3 percent is aimed at the wrong number.

> "We talk about low margins in construction at 3%. But your return on capital is freaking massive. It's 3% 12 times. That's effectively a 30% return on your cap."
>
> AARON ANDERSON

THE MOVE Before pitching or buying any productivity tool, compute the project's return on capital from margin times billing cycles, and make the case against that hurdle rate instead of the margin line.

AARON ANDERSON · FORMER DIRECTOR OF INNOVATION, SWINERTON · HEAR IT →

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EXECS & OWNERS   EP 033

The GC that can bid its CM fee at zero wins, because the margin lives in supply, insurance, and equipment.

Victor Muchiri, a former project engineer at Barton Malow and Turner who later served as Barton Malow's Entrepreneur in Residence, watched fee compression push contractors into self perform, CSIPs, SDI insurance, prefab, and procurement. Turner is the endgame: SourceBlue for procurement, an insurance brokerage, and the newly announced FEC equipment rental business mean it soon will not matter what Turner earns on the CM fee. Walk into a bid meeting against that model and your 3 percent, knocked down to two and a half, still loses to a fee of zero that gets made up on everything else on the back end. His warning is that GCs stuck in no man's land, doing a little of everything, will fail.

> "How do you go into a meeting against a Turner? They'll just do it for zero because you're going to make it up on everything else on the back end."
>
> VICTOR MUCHIRI · 50:18

THE MOVE Decide deliberately what business your GC is in, then build the ancillary lines where the margin actually lives, supply, insurance, equipment, self perform, instead of defending a compressed CM fee with a little of everything.

VICTOR MUCHIRI · GROWTH LEAD, BUILD VISION · HEAR IT AT 50:18 →

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EXECS & OWNERS | FOUNDERS | EP 007

Prefab is a manufacturing business, not construction in a warehouse, and running it with a construction mindset is how you get burned.

Andrew Rener helped run Centerline Prefab and admits he started without an appreciation for the gap between running a manufacturing business and doing construction in a warehouse. Manufacturing demands documented processes, work instructions, and controlled environments that field habits do not supply, a full paradigm shift from how construction teams operate. When COVID stopped travel, he enrolled in his alma mater's remote graduate courses specifically to learn manufacturing processes, a path that grew into a full engineering doctorate. He is equally blunt on the sales side: prefab loses line item cost comparisons and only wins when owners value the holistic case, schedule compression and certainty of outcome.

> "I didn't personally have an appreciation for the difference between running that business as a manufacturing business versus construction in a warehouse."
>
> ANDREW RENER · 3:30

THE MOVE Run a prefab operation as a factory from day one: documented manufacturing processes, work instructions, and controlled environment quality control, staffed with manufacturing expertise rather than transplanted field habits.

ANDREW RENER · EXECUTIVE, ARCHITECTURAL METALS ·
HEAR IT AT 3:30 →