

# Think Like a Plumber

I consider myself lucky to work with several people who I genuinely like. One guy in particular is Mark, who works in our estimating department as a plumbing and piping estimator. We brought him in from the field. He and I probably get along so well because we arrived at our office jobs via the same route. Having worked on the front lines so to speak has given both of us a certain perspective that serves us well as we pound away at our keyboards and calculators every day. Field experience has proven a valuable asset when attempting to bridge the so-called gap between engineers and front-line installers.

Mark is a Master Plumber from New York. (If he were watching me write this he would remind me that he is from "Upstate New York." I've learned that this distinction is important to New Yorkers.) I work with Mark on a daily basis. We get together regularly to review my plumbing designs, and he often challenges my layouts or asks about code compliance. Since he is tasked with estimating my designs and coming up with the right price, he keeps me on my toes.

We also go over plans by others. Many times I'll watch Mark pour over a set of stamped plumbing plans and mutter, "This guy may be an engineer, but he's no plumber!"

Mark is a man who is truly proud of his trade. He takes it seriously. To him, plumbing is Plumbing, with a capital P. It's not pipe fitting. It's not running condensation lines for HVAC equipment or even sprinkler piping. He has no problem laughing at all the butt-crack jokes, but once you get to know him, you get the sense that there is a line that shouldn't be crossed.

Mark learned the trade from experienced men whose knowledge and skills were passed down through generations of craftsmen and artisans. This knowledge is apparent whenever Mark feels compelled to give me advice. (I've also learned that New Yorkers are never shy about giving advice.) Whenever we're engaged in working out a plumbing problem, he's always the first to grab the code book. He'll say, "What's it say in the code?" or "A real plumber would know what to do!" When Mark talks plumbing he is a force to be reckoned with. He speaks of plumbing installations with the same enthusiasm as some talk about the Hail Mary pass or the no-hitter.

Many times I've overheard him lecture one of our young project managers on the proper way to deal with plumbers in the field. Of all the advice that I get from my good friend and colleague, my favorite is "think like a plumber."

Those four words work for me on several levels. Plumbers are not just installers of plumbing fixtures. They are artisans who fashion carefully designed systems that are different for each application and building structure.

Plumbers must think below grade before the slab to tie into the civil system.

Plumbers always think ahead.

Plumbers tend to our waste and bring us clean water to drink and with which to bathe.

Plumbers show us how to be healthy.

Plumbers are constantly challenged to conceal their work while avoiding the work of other trades.

Plumbers work well with others.

Plumbers work in other areas such as fire protection, gas and fuel piping, HVAC piping, compressed air piping, and medical gas, to name a few.

## PLUMBERS SHARE THEIR SKILLS

This past September, our local APSE chapter invited Julius Ballanco to speak about the dynamics of hot water and scald protection. He tells a compelling tale about his own children nearly getting seriously burned by some innocent play in the home shower. Fortunately for the rest of us, Julius is a plumber. Having the knowledge as well as the instincts of a plumber he approached the problem as only a plumber could. The result is new ASSE standards for thermostatic mixing valves that now provide scald protection for everyone.

## HE THOUGHT LIKE A PLUMBER

With the help of people like Julius and my friend Mark I've learned to view the plumbing trade with not only pride at being a member of this ancient craft, but with a healthy respect for the future of plumbing.

My company just received the plans for a rather large regional jail facility to be built in our area. The building will have a siphonic roof drain system, a sanitary vacuum system, storm water storage, and other state-of-the-art plumbing applications. I remember looking over the plans with Mark and saying, "Now this is the kind of project that will help the plumbing trade to assume its rightful place in the mechanical world." For a plumber, the job is a thing of beauty. Mark the plumber/estimator is exited about possibly getting this work. The way he talks, I wouldn't be surprised to see him grab his tools and head for the jobsite. (Any real plumber would love to work this job!)

The really cool thing about the jail is that I know the guy who designed all the plumbing systems. He and I have had many long discussions about plumbing and its place in our society. He also thinks like a plumber every day. As my company proceeds in bidding this job, I'll be able to contact him and discuss all the plumbing systems that make the project a plumber's dream. You see: We're both plumbers; we think alike. **PSD**



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