

Build Careers, Not Just Crews

BY DAVE ANDERSON

Offering More Than a Job

I stumbled into the hearth industry by complete accident in 2003. At the time, my full-time career was working as a backcountry hunting and fishing guide. I was packing into remote areas with horses and mules and flying into the backcountry of Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho, living season to season in some of the most rugged terrain in the West.

After finishing a guiding season in central Montana, I found myself in Missoula for the winter and took a job at Axmen. I started as a helper. Before long, I'd worked my way into a lead installer position—and the rest is history.

What served me well wasn't formal training in the hearth industry, but a strong mechanical mindset and a background in construction. I was fortunate to grow up working alongside my grandfather, remodeling homes and helping on projects starting around the age of 12. Being comfortable with tools, problem-solving,

and physical work translated naturally into installation, service, leadership, and sales.

That experience shaped how I view installation—not as a job, but as the foundation of a long-term career.

Treat Installation as a Core Pillar, Not a Cost Center

The hearth industry doesn't have a product problem. Demand remains strong in many markets, and innovation continues to charge ahead. What varies widely from shop to shop is how installation teams are built, supported, and retained.

It's important to say this clearly: Not all hearth shops struggle with installation or retention. Some do this exceptionally well. These shops consistently deliver quality installs, retain skilled installers for years, and build strong cultures

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around pride, professionalism, and growth.

The common thread among those successful shops isn’t luck—it’s intention. Challenges arise when installation is treated strictly as a cost center rather than a core pillar of the business. When installers feel disposable, unsupported, or stuck, turnover increases. That turnover impacts everything—job callbacks, service workload, sales confidence, customer satisfaction, and overall profitability.

The shops that win over the long haul approach installation differently. They build careers, not just crews.

Hire for Potential, Not Perfection

Many shops hire installers reactively. A lead leaves, schedules back up, and the priority becomes finding someone who can hit the ground running. That approach often leads to mismatched expectations and repeating the same cycle months later.

A more sustainable approach is hiring for potential, not perfection.

This mindset allows shops to develop installers internally instead of constantly chasing experienced candidates who may already be burned out or unwilling to adapt.

Strong candidates may not have hearth experience, but they bring qualities that matter far more in the long run: mechanical curiosity, coachability, reliability, and pride in their work.

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Look for Character, Not Just Experience

Experience doesn’t always equal excellence.

Personally, I would much rather hire someone who hasn’t already been taught habits that don’t align with how I expect work to be done. While not all experienced lead installers fall into this category, many come with a level of arrogance or an unwillingness to listen, learn,

or adapt to a company’s standards.

Over the years, I’ve seen installers cut corners, accept “good enough,” and sacrifice precision. Some lacked an eye for detail or consistency—and yes, I’ve even seen experienced leads eye-ball level instead of using one.

In this industry, there’s no such thing as “good enough.”

Every installation and every service call is a direct reflection of you and your business. Customers may not understand venting charts or code requirements, but they absolutely notice crooked installs, rushed work, and sloppy finishes. Word of mouth can be your best friend—or your worst enemy.

That’s why attitude, humility, and a willingness to learn often matter more than years of experience.

Train for Culture, Not Just Competence

The helper phase is one of the most important—and most overlooked—stages in an installer’s career.

This is where you set expectations. Helpers need to understand what success looks like, what the growth timeline is, and what skills they’ll need at each stage.

Many people entering the workforce today haven’t grown up working with tools or around construction. Basic mechanical aptitude—measuring, cutting, fastening, troubleshooting—is no longer a given. That doesn’t mean the talent isn’t there; it means training and mentorship matter more than ever.

It’s critical to pair helpers with experienced lead installers who take pride in teaching—not just producing. This phase isn’t about speed. It’s about building confidence, habits, and pride in craftsmanship.

A strong helper program creates loyalty early and sets the tone for everything that follows.

Focus on the Path, Not Just the Job

One of the simplest ways to attract and retain quality installers is to show the path before they ever walk in the door.

Including a clear career progression directly in your job posting immediately reframes an entry-level role. It tells candidates this isn't just a job—it's a long-term opportunity.

Here's how that might look in practice:

Example Job Posting Language

We are hiring an Entry-Level Installer and Helper with room for advancement. This position is designed to grow into a Lead Installer role and beyond. We provide hands-on training, mentorship, and clear advancement opportunities into service, leadership, and sales roles. Competitive wages, benefits, paid time off, and long-term career growth are part of our culture.

Example Installer Progression Timeline

- **Year 0-1:** Helper Installer—Learn tools, safety, and jobsite expectations while assisting with installs and service calls.
- **Year 1-3:** Lead Installer—Run jobs independently, maintain quality standards, train helpers, and take ownership of customer-facing work.
- **Year 3-5:** Service Technician or Field Specialist—Focus on diagnostics and troubleshooting with advanced training and certifications, including NFI and manufacturer programs.
- **Year 5+:** Leadership or Hybrid Roles—Move into Service Manager, Field Supervisor, Trainer, Sales, or Hybrid Sales-Service roles.

Advancement should never feel like a game. The strongest shops tie pay increases directly to training, certifications, and demonstrated competency. When installers know exactly how learning more and taking on more responsibility leads to higher pay and long-term stability for their families, they stay invested.

Clear paths don't just retain employees; they also attract the right ones.

View Training as an Investment, Not an Expense

Many manufacturers and distributors in the hearth industry offer high-quality training programs.

Too often, shops view training as an *expense*—airfare, hotels, time away from the shop. But training is actually an *investment* in the company and its people.

Sending installers or service technicians to training improves product knowledge, installation accuracy, troubleshooting ability, and confidence in the field. The return shows up in fewer callbacks, smoother installs, and higher customer satisfaction.

That investment multiplies when you're intentional about what happens after training. When employees return, give them the opportunity to share what they learned with the rest of the team through shop meetings, ride-alongs, or hands-on demonstrations. One person's training can elevate the entire crew.

Simply put, the question isn't whether you can afford to train your people—it's whether you can afford not to.

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Give Leads Ownership, Not Just Titles

Becoming a lead installer should represent more than seniority—it should represent ownership.

Lead installers are responsible not just for completing installs, but for jobsite quality, customer interaction, problem-solving, and mentoring helpers. They're often the face of the company in the customer's home.

The best shops empower their lead installers. They involve them in planning conversations, trust their judgment in the field, and back them when challenges arise. Pay matters—but respect, trust, and autonomy matter just as much.

Prepare for What's Next, Not Just What's Now

Installation is physically demanding work. Over time, many skilled installers want new challenges—and that isn't a failure of the system. It's an opportunity.

The best hearth businesses recognize this and provide multiple paths forward, including service roles, training positions, service management, and hybrid service and sales roles.

Of course, not every installer is cut out for sales—and that's perfectly fine.

Sales requires relationship-building, communication, and trust. Some of those traits come naturally, while others don't—and not everyone wants to develop them. And that's okay.

For the right person, though, a defined path into sales can be a powerful motivator—and a smart long-term strategy.

Personally, I made a commitment to myself to be fully out of the field by the time I turned 40. I had seen too many talented installers pay a physical price over the years—carrying heavy wood stoves, working in tight spaces, and slowly wearing their bodies down. That transition plan wasn't about laziness; it was about longevity.

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Installers who move into sales bring a level of credibility that's difficult to match. They provide more accurate quotes, reduce the chance of missing critical components, and dramatically improve customer satisfaction. They also build stronger communication and trust with installation teams because they've been there and done that.

Building a Brighter Future

None of this happens overnight.

Breaking old habits and long-standing molds can feel uncomfortable—but it can be done, and shops across the country are doing it.

Every owner and manager can make intentional changes that create meaningful impact: clear career paths, investment in training, respect for craftsmanship, and honest communication.

The more of us who commit to building careers instead of filling positions, the stronger our industry becomes.

Installation is the foundation of everything we do. When we invest in our people, we don't just build better installs—we build a brighter future for our staff, our customers, and our industry.