

THE FIVE MINUTE FOREMAN

MARK
BRESLIN



MASTERING THE PEOPLE SIDE OF CONSTRUCTION

How to build loyalty, increase production & make your life easier,
five minutes at a time.

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Reader’s note: I use the terms “him,” “guy,” and “guys” throughout the book knowing full well there are also many outstanding women foremen, leaders, and crew members. For purposes of the book, I use a one-gender approach. For success in the industry, gender doesn’t matter—it is all about whoever can earn and keep the job. **—MB**

THE FIVE MINUTE FOREMAN

INTRODUCTION

**“Things may come to those
who wait, but only things left by
those who hustle.”**

—Abraham Lincoln

Who Really Runs the Construction Industry?

You—the foremen and superintendents of our industry. Rough diamonds.

You do it your own way on every jobsite, in every trade, everywhere in North America. You are tough, loyal, sharp, competitive, ambitious, egotistical, intense, smart, loud, brutal, quiet, confident, humble, insightful, organized, creative, driven, caring, focused, results-oriented, and go-getters. You are coaches, mentors, motivators, and builders—and there are more than 350,000 of you leading an entire industry. Without you, the job simply does not get done.

To get the job done and be a killer foreman in the industry, there are three absolute requirements:

1. You have to work super hard.
2. You have to accept a huge amount of responsibility.
3. You have to make money on your jobs.

There is nothing optional about any of these three requirements. Achieving them will take up every minute of every day. Weeks, months, and years will go by, filled with hard work and the pride of having built great projects.

But what's missing from this grinding career timeline? The opportunity for a foreman to develop himself—to learn, grow, and develop as a professional. To reach his highest potential as a leader. How do you accomplish this? By valuing yourself the same way you value all of the other important things in your life. By taking the time. By making your own development a priority.

Now, a lot of foremen I know are going to tell me they don't need any of that stuff. They understand how to get their crews to work hard. They have been doing the job so long that no one needs to tell them how to run work. And you know what? *I agree.*

So instead of talking about how to run work, how about we find new ways to work on the people side of the business, with benefits that are both positive and obvious?

Just imagine the possibilities...

- Your jobs always make money.
- You never have an accident or injury on any project.
- Everyone on your crews gets along and cares about each other.
- You always complete the job ahead of the schedule.
- You can focus on what you do best all the time.
- You enjoy your job more.
- Every top guy in the industry wants to work for you.
- The people you lead continue to show more initiative, productivity, and loyalty.

All of these might seem too ambitious, or even impossible to some—but you have to imagine what can happen on the job when you are at your very best, at the absolute limit of your talent and powers. You have to think big.

Small actions on your part can result in big change and better results. Even five minutes per day can make a big difference. Few words in this book will be a surprise to top foremen. It's not about information; it's about action. Doing. Something. New. This is the real message and purpose of *The Five Minute Foreman*. My job is to help you reach your potential. Your job is to want to reach it.

So put aside your doubt. Park your ego. Open your eyes and mind. Be confident that you can most likely kick my ass. And take on the challenge of becoming The Five Minute Foreman.

—Mark Breslin

What's in It for YOU: More or Less

I know two things about both of us: One, we like to lead, and two, we can put up with a lot in order to be the one in charge. You have the fire and the passion. My kind of people. The kind of people I want to be a part of helping and developing.

So with that in mind, I wrote this book to help you get more—*and less*—out of your jobs. And both are a payoff.

Let's start with more. I want you to have:

- More productivity and loyalty from your crews
- More interesting and challenging work
- More enjoyment and fun on the job
- More opportunities for advancement and career growth
- More respect from your co-workers, contractors, and owners
- More money and career opportunities.

But there are also some things I want you to have less of:

- Less bullsh** and frustration
- Less stress
- Less time putting up with what you think you cannot change
- Less time worrying about your job
- Less time “firefighting” problems so you will have more time to put towards creating opportunities.

Why are these valuable? Because they make your life better and easier.

Why are better and easier important? I know what it is to be the guy who takes responsibility. I may be a CEO now, but I started in the field doing dirty, lowest-guy-on-the-job grunt work and worked my way up. Like many of you, I worked it out myself. My people suffered plenty while I figured it out. I made every mistake outlined in this book. I was not a real leader until I put in some serious effort to learn. It took me a long time to realize that. My road was not about “better and easier.” To now be able to speak to hundreds of thousands of craft workers and actually teach and help tens of thousands of top leaders in our industry is a dream come true—but something very hard-earned.

So as you read on, the bottom line is, I wrote this book because I care about you. And no, you can’t have a hug.

Killer Tools for Your Toolbox

This book gives you tools. That's it. Back up the Snap On tool truck and unload that sucker. Hell, you would take as much as they were giving, right?

Well, here they are, as many killer tools as you can use. Just check out the Table of Contents or the list of Five Minute Lessons. Maybe you'll pick two or twenty. But like any tools, they will only help if you use them. So how should you use the tools in *The Five Minute Foreman*? Simple: any way that works for you. It doesn't matter if you read this book all the way through or a little at a time over the next six months. It has to work for you. There is only one key instruction: Read it, do it, practice it. Watch for the result. Repeat.

You'll also notice that some of the book's major themes show up over and over. I don't repeat myself because I'm an idiot. Everyone learns by repetition. So rather than just hope that you "get it," I would rather hit you with a two-by-four on the head over and over again. It was the only way anyone ever got through to me. Hopefully you will be smarter and less stubborn than I was.

Finally, readers may recognize a couple of small bites of material from my earlier books, *Survival of the Fittest* and *Alpha Dog*. I've included them because they contain important lessons that should also be reviewed by any top foreman.

Discipline, Determination, and Room to Grow

As a foreman, you've already achieved a high level of success, and it is a sign of your talent and relentless determination. But showing that you have the ability to grind it out does not help you get to the next level. There is always room to grow.

There's always a new lesson to learn, a new skill to acquire, a new tool to add to your toolbox. The Navy SEALs don't stop training after a couple of successful missions. In fact, when they're not deployed, they spend 90% of their time training and improving their skills. It is about discipline.

An NFL team doesn't skip summer practice after they win the Super Bowl. They keep pushing and improving. The process of constant improvement and self-education is something very common and very powerful in successful people and organizations. Just because construction as an industry has not pushed this as a priority doesn't mean you shouldn't pursue it yourself. It is about determination.

This kind of learning leads to self-pride. That is something that we all want and need; we just don't admit it very often. It is about finding room to grow.

Five Minutes a Day = 21 Hours a Year

Do you do something for yourself every day for your own personal and professional growth? Please tell me you haven't given up on growing your own potential.

A small self-investment every day is the basic strategy of this book. If you spend five minutes a day applying the lessons in these pages, you should become a better foreman, leader, manager, and person.

Five minutes might sound like an unrealistic time frame, not enough to make a difference. Is this just another quick-fix approach like everything else you see sold and packaged for the 3 a.m. TV crowd? No. This isn't a pitch for some lame infomercial.

I found out a long time ago that you hard-core construction foremen are not easy to convince. The concepts have to prove themselves to you. So the test is this: If you spend five minutes a day working on yourself, you will see changes not only in yourself but in the people who work for you—and damn quick, too.

So why five minutes? Why not ten or twenty? Because at five minutes...

- Anyone can do it.
- No one can say, "I don't have the time."
- It doesn't interfere with what you are already doing.
- Over an entire year, investing just five minutes a day equals more than twenty hours of self-development.
- Doing anything better motivates you, boosts your morale, and shows your best side to the people who work with you.

If you can hang with that five minute commitment, I promise you will develop new habits. You'll see that changes in approach create changes in the performance of others. Not every lesson will apply to you. Each foreman has a different set of existing skills and talents. That's fine. Choose the ones that really strike a chord and commit to turning those lessons into actions on the jobsite. Say the words, execute the actions. Make it happen.

Five Minute Obstacles

Doing something different just once for five minutes is easy. Doing something different for five minutes every day is hard. How do you keep adding a little more to your abilities and ambitions every day? By believing that you are worth it. By believing that you are a very talented person who can and will continue to grow your abilities. This book is really an exercise in valuing yourself at a higher level in life.

You also have to recognize that once you commit to a course of self-improvement, obstacles will show up. A lot of times it will feel as if you're getting in your own way. These obstacles might include:

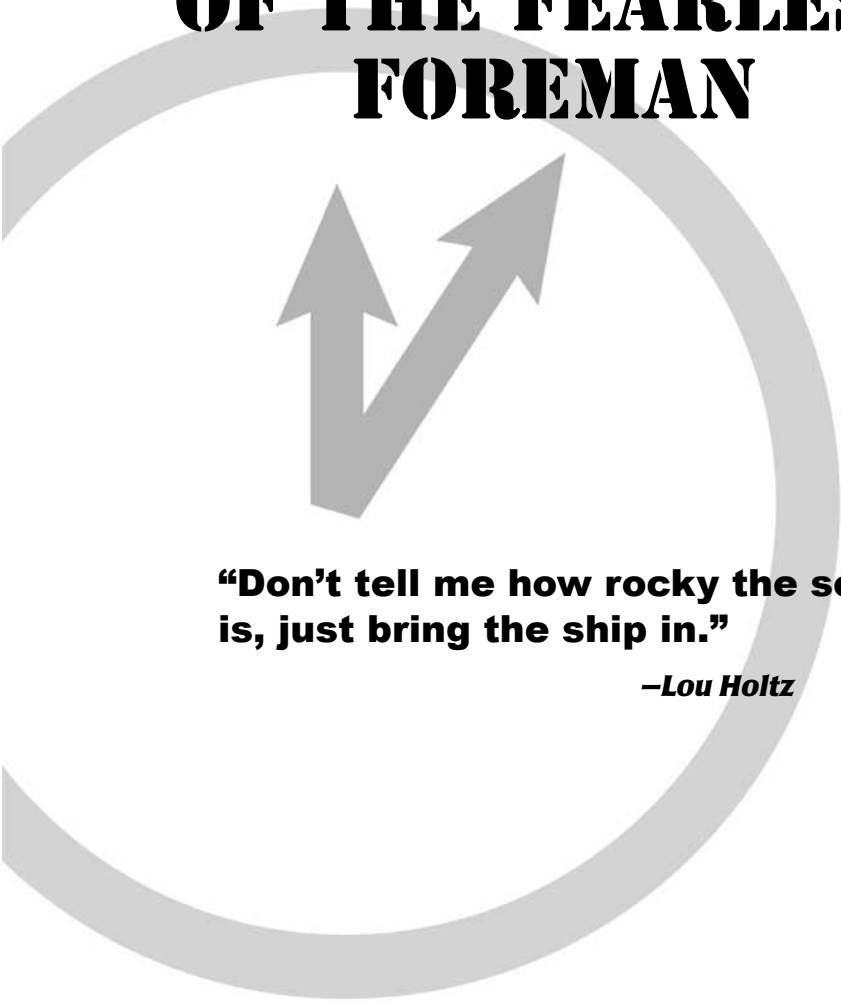
- Sticking with old habits
- Staying with "This is the way we've always done it"
- Fear of change
- Discomfort or embarrassment
- Worrying about what others will think
- Thinking you are giving up power
- Stress or time pressure
- Success (the belief that already being good at something means you don't have to try to improve).

Some of these obstacles are not about your performance but about you worrying how others might judge you. When you try to do something different, people might look at you funny or question you. What can I tell you? That's just part of the deal. It has to be about you first.

Self-improvement is supposed to be uncomfortable at first. That's why so many people don't do it or seem negative when others try. But guess what? It's not about them. And if they are not sincerely supporting your growth and goals, they are not worth listening to anyway.

CHAPTER 1

THE TEN FACES OF THE FEARLESS FOREMAN



**“Don’t tell me how rocky the sea
is, just bring the ship in.”**

—Lou Holtz

A top foreman must play many roles. The challenge is knowing when and how to adapt. There are many ways to lead, but for a foreman who wants to excel, the following ten key identities will serve as a very good foundation.

1. The **Bad Ass** with Purpose

Even a bad-ass foreman has to have a reason for being a bad ass. Professionals always have a purpose over and above just getting the job done. This purpose is the underlying theme of everything they do. It is something that provides the “big picture” for their efforts and fuels their enthusiasm.

I would like to share with you my thoughts on the purpose of a professional construction foreman.

The purpose of a professional construction leader and foreman is:

To build *people* into remarkable performers
To build these performers into amazing *teams*
Who then build high-quality, *profitable projects*.

Note that people and teamwork come before the work or the money.

If you want to think “big picture” on your job and in your life, remember that your purpose rises above all else. The job always gets done one way or another. Money is made or money is lost. But along the way you will end up making a big, big difference to the people who trust you to teach, coach, and lead them.

2. The Protector of Life and Death

Perhaps the most important part of being a construction leader is ensuring a safe jobsite. Your leadership can make the difference between life and death.

A leader takes responsibility for the safety and well-being of those who work for him, regardless of what he thinks about them. There are only a few occupations left where people put their lives in harm’s way, and construction is one of them.

This standard is one of personal and professional responsibility. If you compromise safety, someone will pay the price—in pain, injury, or even death. I have been on jobsites where multiple fatalities have occurred. I have seen the bodies. I have seen the sorrow and second-guessing. I have seen foremen and contractors crushed under the weight of regret. I have seen guys hang it up because they didn’t want the responsibility anymore. But guess what? It was too late to turn back the clock.

Many years ago I was trained by guys who didn't take safety seriously. Maybe when you were coming up it was considered unproductive or not macho to follow safety rules to the letter. I didn't pay attention to the safety policies or the rules the contractor asked me to follow. No. I learned by watching my foreman. That is what determined my behavior. That is what determined my actions. That was the root of many unsafe acts I stupidly engaged in. That was "old-school" thinking that today has nearly been eliminated.

I know that today's safety procedures can sometimes seem like overkill, and the messages can get repetitive after a while. But it's up to you, as a leader, to explain to your crew why there is absolutely no compromise when it comes to safety. There can be no exceptions either—for anyone. It is not about just making them follow the rules. We're back to the people skills side of the business again: You have to get them to share your mindset that safety is a great thing, that it is good for everyone, and that they should believe in it fully. That is the way to create the right environment for safety excellence.

Get them to understand and then believe.

The bottom line is this: You are in charge of life and death. Your crew has to know that you are serious about safety—not because you enjoy giving them a hard time, but because you care about them and their families. You want them to go home safe and healthy. Let them see that you take their safety personally. It's about the brotherhood of the job. It's important for them to understand and believe—but it has to translate into them taking care of each other. You are the only one on that jobsite who can really get them to invest in and care for each other.

The difference between life and death is in your hands.

3. The Big Money, Big Responsibility Leader

Most foremen have no idea how important they are. They often still think of themselves as blue collar craftspeople. That is so wrong in so many ways that I don't know where to start. But the real place to measure foreman responsibility is in dollars.

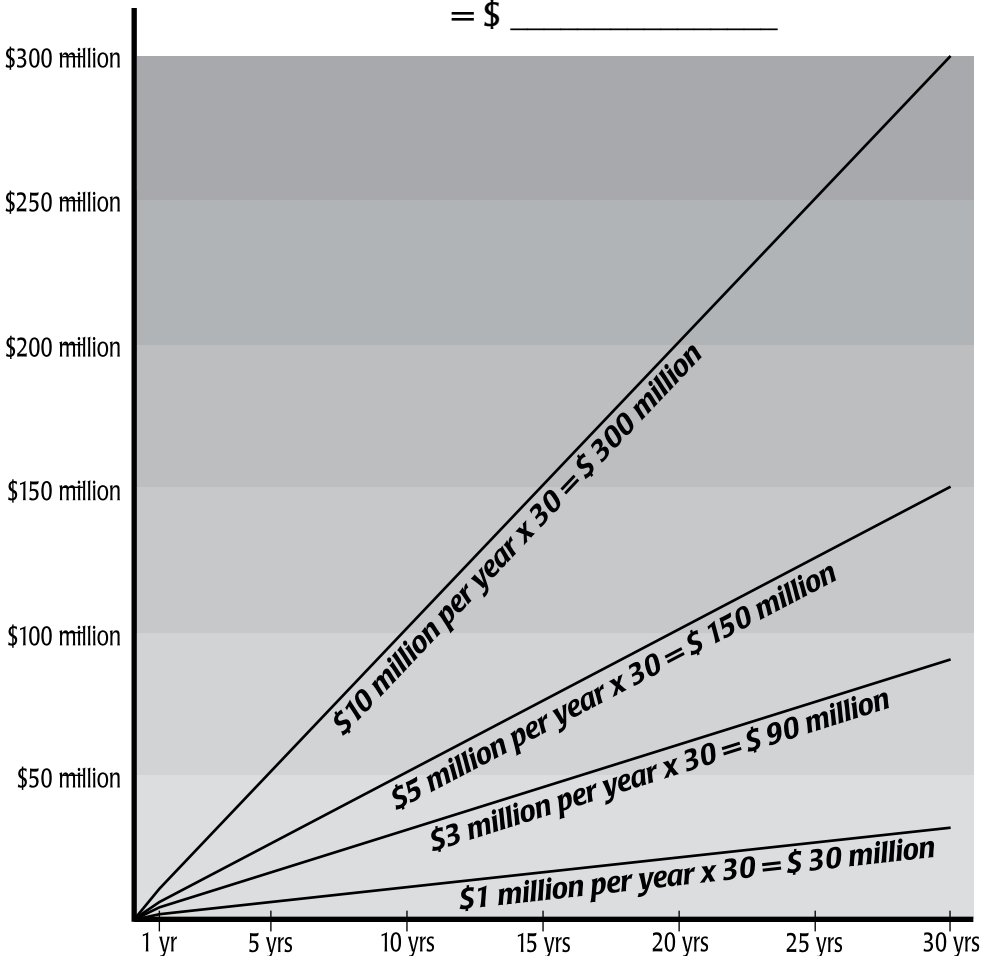
The story of the dollars should convince you that foremen like you are high-level, serious leaders and managers. Please let me prove it to you. If you complete just one exercise in this book, make sure it's this one.

Answer this question:

What is the total dollar volume that a top foreman or superintendent will manage in a thirty-year career? Please do this math.

Annual Volume Managed: \$ _____
 _____ x 30 years

 = \$ _____



Think about those numbers and *get serious*. Your actual amount will vary depending on your industry and the size of contractor you work for. But the dollars managed by a foreman over the course of thirty years can easily total \$30 million...\$50 million...\$200 million...even *\$300 million or more*.

That's *one foreman* managing tens or even hundreds of millions of dollars worth of:

- People
 - Money
 - Schedules
 - Materials
 - Risks
 - Safety
 - Client satisfaction.

That's more responsibility than 90% of white-collar business people will ever have in their lives. A top foreman will often make more independent decisions than most business college graduates working in some cubicle for a big corporation. A foreman lives on the high wire. He is a serious professional who calls the shots almost all the time. In summary:

Big money.
Big responsibility.

Get your mind wrapped around owning your new title:
Professional Construction Leader (PCL).

4. The “Sink or Swim” Graduate

Now that we’ve established that a top foreman has huge responsibilities, let’s travel back into your history. How did you get picked as foreman? Chances are it was for one or more of these reasons:

- Hardest worker on the crew
- Smartest craft guy on the team
- Most ambitious
- Natural leadership ability
- Tommy didn’t show up
- Hated working for others.

No matter how you became a foreman, you probably went through the “sink or swim” school of training. That’s when a contractor takes the best guy he can find and then chucks him way out into the middle of the swimming pool of the jobsite. If the guy swims to the side and brings the job in, he gets to be the foreman. And if he drowns? “Well, tough sh**, kid—we’ll find someone else and chuck his ass in.”

If you are a foreman today, I know that you swam to the side. You made it. So, here might be the most significant question of this entire book:

**HOW MUCH LEADERSHIP AND
MANAGEMENT TRAINING DID YOU GET AFTER
YOU SWAM TO THE SIDE OF THE POOL?**

- a) Zero
- b) Nothing
- c) Nada
- d) Oops
- e) WTF?

More than 95% of foremen report that they received ZERO professional leadership or management training.

So let me see if I understand this: As a contractor, first I'm going to take a great guy out of the field and off his tools. Then I'm going to give him zero leadership and management training. Then I'm going to turn over anywhere from \$20 million to \$200 million worth of work to him and make him figure it all out for himself. Is this correct? Is this your story?

WHO WOULD BE CRAZY ENOUGH TO RUN A BUSINESS LIKE THAT?

Only the entire construction industry.

Foremen have had to figure it out for themselves. Foremen have had to forge themselves into successful leaders. This do-it-yourself model is a hard way to go, and it's bad business, too. It takes too much time, effort, stress, and trial-and-error. "Sink or swim" is a lame excuse for the development of talent like yours. You deserve better. Now is the opportunity to grow.

5. The Moneymaking Machine

The ability to create a successful financial outcome for each and every project you work on is *a primary job requirement* if you want to build a career as a foreman.

If you can't make money, you can't stay.

The key is to understand that there are many different ways the foreman makes money. The ability to meet a schedule and stay within a budget estimate are two obvious skills every foreman needs to succeed, but there are others that are just as crucial.

Long-term success with profit generation is also achieved by mastering the “people skills” side of the business. You have to get your crew to *want* to make money on the project. You have to get them thinking as you do: Every dollar matters, every minute counts.

There is widespread thinking on a lot of jobsites that the contractor is a bad guy because he is making money. What kind of bullsh** is that? His risk. His money. His equipment. His ass. He might do well. He might go broke. He put you in charge as foreman for the purpose of making money off all those resources. So getting your people to understand and support the idea that making money is the name of the game is an important part of mastering the people side of the business. They have to buy in as players and not just spectators. They have to accept the idea that making money is good for everyone—and not resent the contractor or you for pushing hard to make it happen.

6. The Cocky SOB

A professional is expected to be confident in both words and actions. A crew wants a confident foreman. But there is a fine line between someone who believes in himself and someone who is over-confident.

The industry needs someone who not only shows confidence but also breeds that in others. Super-capable, but not arrogant. Not abusive. Not above everyone else. Someone who has the power, knows it, and uses it very wisely.

But he probably also has a damn high opinion of himself.

7. The Compassionate Giver

Being a professional requires you to be a giving person. This never makes you a soft or weak leader. The strongest people in this world are often those who are capable of giving the most.

Being a giver at work is kind of like being a human ATM. When's the last time you went to get cash from an ATM and it spit out blank pieces of paper instead? Never. Unless it's broken, you can count on an ATM to give you what you ask for: money, something of great value. And it gives it to you on a reliable, consistent basis.

In many ways, a professional foreman is like that ATM. Unless he's sick or injured, the contractor and the crew rely on him to give them something of value day in and day out. Every time they ask for it. On demand. What are they looking for?

- Direction
- Encouragement
- Guidance
- Coaching
- Expertise
- Problem solving
- Structure
- Decisions
- Mediation
- Advice.

A professional foreman who gives is someone who operates from a strong set of values. Integrity, honesty, an unwillingness to pass the buck, caring, compassion, fairness—these make up the “values blueprint” that a foreman uses to build his career and his relationships. A good leader is someone who realizes it is only through his giving that others can reach their potential. Giving is probably the ultimate foundation of the professional foreman—the ability, desire, and capability to give until it hurts.

8. The Enforcer

At the end of the day, there is only one person on the crew responsible for making sure that company policies are followed and everyone behaves professionally. That person is the foreman...also known as The Enforcer.

The Enforcer is not a friend, a pal, or a coach. You cannot use your buddy status with The Enforcer. The Enforcer is the guy the crew knows will not compromise on key policies or company values. They know that if they push, there will be push-back. They also know that if they go over the line, they are going home.

The Enforcer does not exercise power just because he can. He uses it to keep people in line and to prevent them from doing stupid things. He is both feared and respected. A guy unable or unwilling to be The Enforcer is going to deal with a lot of complications while trying to be only the good guy.

9. The Winning Coach

No team ever won anything with a bad coach.

Lots of above-average teams have won everything because they had a winning coach.

Here is what that winning coach looks like:

- Disciplined
- Demanding
- Detailed
- Enthusiastic
- Instinctive
- Decisive.

Motivating, managing, and placing talent in the right place to succeed—that's a winning coach's approach. He breeds loyalty. He breeds commitment. He gets the best out of people. He coaches for results. And it's a great approach for you as a top foreman.

10. The Role Model

The most influential and visible way everyone on the jobsite learns is by watching you. Whether you like it or not, you are a role model, just like the guy on the front of the Wheaties box or the sports hero your kids look up to. That comes with some responsibility. It really is something you have to live up to.

Role model. Totally cool. The guys will never say, "Hey, I want to be like you, man." Not out loud, anyway. But you sure want them to think it.