

# The Builder's Engineer

## Best Subcontractor Ever – Jeff Whitebear



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I don't normally use real names in this column. But today is different.

Jeff Whitebear owns a small siding company – maybe five employees. He recently did the siding and exterior trim on my house. I've worked with and managed hundreds of contractors in my career.

It could be that Jeff Whitebear is the best of them all.

You wouldn't guess it by his looks. Jeff comes to work in sweats and rubber boots. His hair is worn long, and shaving is not a priority. While it's true that you should dress for success, you should always dress appropriately. In his line of work, Jeff's attire and grooming are entirely appropriate. Far more important, however, is what Jeff wears on the inside: a friendly smile and an ever-cheerful attitude.

Here is how a siding contractor (not the most glamorous profession) earns the Builder's Engineer top honors.

- **The Bid.** I had Jeff bid my project based solely on the recommendation of another favorite contractor: my ICF, framing, and finish carpenter of choice, Travis Stanton. Jeff didn't know it, but his was the only bid. Unfortunately, it came in higher than I anticipated. Not knowing Jeff from Adam, I almost went out to bid again but thought I'd try negotiating first. Rather than blaming his high number on the architect, or his supplier, or on me for estimating poorly, he offered money-saving tips. We negotiated openly and honestly to a price and work scope agreeable to us both. This is called win-win negotiation - in my book, the only kind.
- **Communication.** Jeff went to great pains to keep me abreast of timeframe, costs, material status, problems, solutions... everything an owner needs to know. I never had to guess, and more importantly, never did I have to initiate the conversation.
- **Quality.** Jeff understands the right mix of perfectionism and production. He was fast, but did very nice work, particularly on the large amount of cedar trim.
- **People Skills.** You are human – you know how you like to be treated. Is this how you treat customers? Is it how your employees treat customers? Regardless of how

much or little formal schooling Jeff has had, he is a master at human interaction. He worked cheerfully and tirelessly with my wife and me to ensure a thrilling final product. Not everyone has the patience to work with both the husband and the wife; a subtlety which carries a lot more referral weight than most contractors realize.

- Change Orders. As issues and problems arose, Jeff discussed each with me prior to doing any extra work or spending money. His change order prices were reasonable - no gouging, skimming, or bid compensating. Talk about thrilled! I've been gouged at so many times by change orders, to run across a contractor who didn't view them as a license to extort was truly refreshing.
- Safety. One of Jeff's employees thought it was cool to shoot nail gun nails around like bullets. This simply is not tolerable and Jeff warned his crew accordingly. When word got back that the guy kept doing it, he was down the road the next day. No B.S., no messing around.
- Checking In. Perhaps most important of all, Jeff Whitebear himself was at my site every day. He didn't necessarily stay there working, but he was absolutely on top of each aspect. As a result, my expectations were exceeded, very few mistakes were made, and he finished on time.

Bottom line is this, Jeff Whitebear has the right stuff to be as successful as he wants to be. Anyone in business can learn by his excellent example.

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