

# CFR The Commercial Flooring Report

For the Commercial Floor Covering Industry

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## It's Not the Installers; It's the Management...!

The Lack of Qualified Management is the Biggest Threat to the Tile and Stone Industries...

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San Diego, CA, July 09, 2024



This article is being published with the consent of Donato Pompo who we have a relationship with. It addresses issues related to tile, but you can substitute any flooring. We at LGM are constantly look at large commercial flooring failures of all kinds, from concrete to carpet, that could have been prevented had someone recognized at the onset of the installation, or even before that, that there would be an inevitable failure. We are seeing adjustments in the marketplace for installers of all kinds in all the trades that will ease the stress but, we still need installers because without them flooring products are just ballast.



I keep reading industry news articles with headlines such as “The well-documented lack of qualified installers has resulted in wide ranging implications across the industry.” “The shortage of qualified installers is a critical issue...” “Installation Errors cause Failures.” We do not lack qualified installers. We could use more installers as skilled installers age out of the industry. The fact is that we lack qualified management. It isn't the installers that cause failed installations, it is the management that won't spend the time or money to properly manage their installers and oversee their work. If management was paying attention and properly managing their businesses, they would be preventing problems and at the same time providing crucial training to their installers on how to properly install tile. They go hand in hand.

Running a business isn't rocket science. Just like any properly run business, you have oversight responsibilities, and you have checks and balances integrated within the business to make sure things run properly. You have internal quality controls in each department of the business to prevent potential problems, and you have human resource responsibilities to help ensure you create a meaningful company culture to encourage quality work, a healthy environment, and provide opportunities for your workforce to grow and contribute to the success of your business; and to minimize attrition.

Yes, installers need more training, but the installers are not the problem. Even the less experienced tile installers know how to work with tools and follow instructions. Of course, there are always some knuckleheads who don't follow instructions, try to cut corners, and don't do good work. The real problem is with "Management". A company's culture starts from the top of a company with the type of leadership they employ, and the integrity, or lack of integrity, that ownership and management expresses. It is the ownership and management of the company who chooses not to spend the money and provide adequate supervision and oversight of their installer's work. Of course, on commercial work the general contractor pressuring the tile subcontractors doesn't help, but it doesn't justify not providing the oversight to make sure your installers are performing the work correctly.

It starts at the top of the business in terms of quality and leadership. If management is emphasizing profits over performing the work properly, not only will there be more problems, but they are not cultivating a quality mentality and they are not providing the training to make their workers more skilled, capable, and productive. It is short sighted to rationalize that you can save a buck now, but at the expense of future profit opportunities for your business and for the industry at large. Not a good legacy to leave for your family's future generations...

Tile failures are becoming more common, and in general most tile installations I see today do not meet the industry standards. These situations are getting worse, not better. There is not only a lot more litigation over bad tile jobs, but there is a much larger group of consumers who spent a lot of money, emotion, and time in selecting their tile, and then paid the installer a lot more, only to end up with an unsatisfied poor-quality installation. This group of consumers can't afford, or it just isn't practical, to hire a professional forensic tile expert like my company Ceramic Tile And Stone Consultants, Inc. (CTaSC) to go out to investigate the problem. Often the end-user can't have the problems corrected or be compensated for having to repair the work, and end up having to just live with it, as is more often the case. Of course, they will never be compensated for the lost time and emotional damage they will be subjected to in dealing with a bad tile job.

Normally it is better for the end-user to just put their money towards fixing or replacing the bad tile installation, rather than to litigate it. Of course, if they don't know what caused the problem, then they don't know what to fix or what went wrong in order to avoid the same problem if they replace the installation. Often the installers or the general contractor will try to fix the symptoms of the problem rather than the



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underlying problem as a quick fix, only to subject the end user to more frustration and unhappiness. The frustration and emotional toll it takes on the homeowner is immense. Improper installations that result in problems are also very costly to the tile installation company. It not only is costly in terms of out-of-product expenses, but it is costly in terms of lost time and the harm it does to the company's reputation and the harm it does to the industry as a whole.

What do you think people do who have a problem with something that they spent a lot of money on that may have resulted in additional costs, lots of inconvenience, and perhaps is a daily eye sore...? They complain to others (negative advertising) and they will probably select something else the next time, all of which costs our industry in sales and reputation. This affects all of our livelihoods, regardless of if we are a manufacturer, a distributor or an installer.

Bad workmanship affects commercial tile work in a similar way, except the end-user normally can afford to hire a forensic tile expert and an attorney to go after the installer who did the bad work. When there is a tile problem on commercial or high-end residential work there is normally going to be an architect, interior designer, engineer, and general contractor involved, and their work or lack of work can certainly contribute to the problem. So, it isn't always the tile installers' fault, although often they are part of the problem.

So how is this affecting tile use and consumption? Airports and malls are going with poured terrazzo rather than historically going with tile that caused them problems. Student housing projects are replacing tile showers with continuous plastic enclosures with prefabricated plastic pans that are not likely to leak. Condominium projects are switching to other options for façades, balconies, and pool decks because of all of the failures or extreme maintenance issues they are subjected to due to improper installations. Train stations are going back to poured concrete because of the expense of tile failures. These represent huge volumes of tile in both ceramic, precast, and natural stone applications.

So yes, there is a shortage of installers in the industry, particularly skilled labor. The average age of a tile installer is something like 40+ years old. We need more installers, and in spite of tile sales being down somewhat in the last year or so, there is still plenty of business to go around that just compounds the problems. So, we do need to recruit more installers and we need to reach those high school kids to let them know that being a tile installer is an honorable profession that pays quite well and is very rewarding in allowing

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people to express their creativity.

Our industry has grown tremendously over the last 20 years, and the skilled labor hasn't been able to keep up with the demand and market changes. Plus, our tile products and installation products, and construction conditions and requirements have changed. Unfortunately, for the most part installers don't learn their trade and skills at a trade school, they learn on the job taught by others, which may or may not be consistent with the current industry installation standards. Tile installers don't have the opportunity to easily receive continued education to learn about new standards and products. Installers typically don't have an opportunity to learn all of the industry standards or to fully learn and understand the complexity of their work without having to miss work and spend a lot of time and money traveling to industry events.

Industry standards are based on the experience of our forefathers, manufacturers, and others who have made mistakes, and learned from their mistakes, and who have made sacrifices and spent a lot of money and time to be a volunteer on industry committees to formulate and update our industry standards. So, the intent of the standards is to learn from others' mistakes and to avoid those costly mistakes that can affect our industry and our pocketbooks. Thus, if tile installers follow industry standards and manufacturers' instructions, they can avoid failures and have successful tile installations to perpetuate and grow their business and our industry. Tile Installer training is an investment that everyone in the industry benefits from because when there is a problem it doesn't matter who is at fault, we all will pay one way or the other with our time, money or reputation; whether as an individual, a company, or as an industry.

Often, we see with both large and smaller tile installation companies that they don't have fulltime qualified and informed foreman and supervisors overseeing the work of their installers. Someone might be directing the work to some degree, but typically all of the installers are doing their own thing and not following an organized and structured installation process. There isn't someone systematically overlooking the work and performing basic quality control steps to verify the work is being done correctly. This is a critical part of training installers is having someone overseeing the installers' work and telling them not to do it this way or that way, and then showing them how it needs to be done, and then following up periodically making sure the work is being done correctly. This is how people learn a trade; they learn on the job by having mentors and foreman teaching them the right way and having them correct their work when it is found to be performed wrong.

When I was in the union as an installer, I had a mentor overseeing my work making sure I avoided and fixed mistakes, that is what made me a better installer. The key is catching mistakes before they get covered up, so you have an opportunity to correct the mistake and avoid a potential costly failure.

The problem is that often company management doesn't provide the qualified foreman and the training because they think they can't afford it, or they think they can't be competitive if they bid a job with a full-time qualified foreman. This creates a culture of "it's good enough", which when on the job the installers are being pushed and they cut corners, or they cover up mistakes because they don't have time to do it right, they convince themselves "it is good enough". The fact is, they can't afford not to do right.

The tile installation companies who regularly do good work are the companies whose management is quality-minded and provide adequate supervision and oversight to verify their labor is performing their work per industry standards in a systematic manner. They take the time and effort to oversee and train their installers. They don't have expensive call backs because they catch their mistakes before they become a problem.

So, what is the solution? Tile company management needs to be trained in how to implement a Total Quality Management (TQM) program at their company. We need training programs for the project managers, Supervisors, and foreman. Our tile installers need more accessible, convenient, and affordable training. Every major occupation has continued education programs to annually earn CEU's. Whether you are a doctor, an attorney, an accountant, an insurance agent, a real estate agent, an architect, an engineer, etc. So, doesn't it make sense that tile installers should have to earn CEU's to not only stay



current with the industry standards and practices, but to be reminded of those requirements, which will make them a better installer?

Other industries utilize online training platforms. Whether they are self-paced online courses or webinars they need to be affordable and readily available; particularly during the evenings when people are not working. The curriculum and course content needs to be relevant to the occupation and the type and scope of work of the respective worker. The course has to be clear, concise and straight forward. The great thing about online courses on LMS platforms is they are available 24/7. The University of Ceramic Tile and Stone (UofCTS) offers online courses for the tile and stone industry. There are sales courses and installation courses for teaching the installers the tile industry installation standards, methods, and practices. NTCA also offers various online training courses as well.

Our industry does have a great Ceramic Tile Education Foundation (CTEF) organization who provides some training and offers testing for those who want to become a Certified Tile Installer (CTI) through CTEF. The CTI testing is rigorous and to pass it you have to be very knowledgeable and skilled at complicated mortar bed installations. I have financially supported this organization for years by donating several thousand dollars each year because I appreciate and believe in what they do for the good of our industry. The problem is that most installers in the USA will never be able to pass this test, and more likely would never attempt to qualify for or take the test. There are installers who only do thinset applications or use backer boards, but they all need training. Most installers are busy working trying to make a living and if it isn't affordable and readily available, then they don't have an incentive to take the time for training.

The problem is that to have access to the training you have to already have the skills. Regardless of level of skills, experience, and knowledge, all installers and management should have access to free and convenient education courses to teach the basic standards and the necessary quality control steps that will prevent problems such as the adage goes, measure twice and cut once. The basic training will provide incentives to learn more and help prevent costly problems. This is in the best interest of the industries!

Although NTCA members are offered some training, and Union members have some required training, we still have the same installation problems because most of these installation companies are not providing adequate oversight during the installation as a method of preventing problems and educating their labor. Again, this is a management problem, not a labor problem. The labor installation errors are the symptoms of inadequate management and oversight.

We need tile project manager courses, tile supervisor courses, and foreman courses to teach these management level people how to establish and implement a quality control plan. They need to be taught the importance and value of having full-time proactive oversight on their projects verifying the work is being done correctly. Of course, first they need to be taught what are the critical steps of a tile installation, such as substrate preparation, that the wire in a wire reinforced mortar bed doesn't sit on the bottom as we often find, but that it is to be suspended in the non-bonded mortar bed. They need to thoroughly understand that movement joints go through the entire tile assembly with an ASTM C920 sealant over a closed-cell foam backer rod, and the wire reinforcement has to be cut at the movement joint, so the entire movement joint is unrestricted. They need to have full thinset contact under all edges and corners of tiles, and 95% continuous thinset contact between the tile and its substrate in exterior applications and interior wet areas. What the Hell, why not do that in all applications? Judging by what we see in most jobs it either isn't understood or they think what they do is "good enough".

Company owners and management need to understand that the quality control process trains their installers in how to do their work properly and how to be more proficient and efficient in their work. This investment in quality control/training not only will make their company more productive and profitable, but it is insurance that they will not have a major failure. Their reputation and opportunity for future work is at stake, and for better or worse it becomes their legacy in the industry and for their family.

So, what is at stake if we do nothing to change the way tile installation work is performed? We continue to have more tile installation problems causing more negative publicity. We need a paradigm shift in how the industry addresses tile installations and these problems. We have many stakeholders who are affected by poor workmanship and failures. Tile Manufacturers, Importers and Distributors, Floor Covering dealers and installers, Tile Installation Companies, builders, architects, interior designers, and the consumer are all negatively affected by poor workmanship and tile failures. It affects them, their clients and their families. Again, the tile installation errors are symptoms of inadequate company management.

The industry stakeholders need to spend the money to develop a robust online training platform like the UofCTS.org that is available to the industry 24/7. The training platform should be used both for training our industry management, installers, and to be used as a recruiting outreach tool to provide free online education courses for high school students around the country. We should be providing free tile installation courses to high school teachers to use as part of a curriculum for introducing students to the opportunities and benefits of becoming tile installers. This also can be a way to help tile installation companies source potential tile helpers who have had some exposure and training to the tile trade and the tile installation methods, practices, and standards.

The only way we can afford to take on such a necessary opportunity to improve the quality of tile installations and to recruit the younger generations to the tile industry is, there has to be a substantial annual pledge by all of the industry stakeholders to donate a total combined sum of \$1 Million dollars or more annually. We need a full-time Instructional Designer creating online courses and we need a full-time Business Development Director promoting the training and recruiting around the country. Companies like Daltille, Florida Tile, Crossville, StonePeak, Florim, and other tile manufacturers domestic and internationally should see the value and justification to commit to a sum that is a relatively small percentage of their sales. Major distributors like Walker Zanger, Arizona Tile, Best Tile, Bedrosians, Emser, Artistic Tile, Virginia Tile, Louisville Tile, Floor And Décor, Home Depot, Lowes, and others should pledge a donation. There are associations such as TCNA, NTCA, TCAA, IMI, TCNA, TTMAC, CTDA, IMI, NSI, and others who should also pledge an annual donation.

If everyone donates a little, we can develop a powerful synergy to improve the quality of tile installations and to recruit young capable people to give them an opportunity to a great profession and a very healthy lifestyle, and to help perpetuate quality work and a good reputation and image for our industry. Thus sell more tile and get more work.

Please contact me for any questions or for finding out how your company can pledge a donation to this education and recruiting campaign. We owe it to future generations to create and perpetuate a legacy that our future generations can be proud of and profit from by earning a good living for them and their families.

Donato V. Pompo is a licensed CA C54 tile installer and is the founder of Ceramic Tile And Stone Consultants, Inc. (CTaSC) a forensic investigation and consulting company founded in 2002. CTaSC is considered by many as the leading expert in North America. CTaSC has inspectors throughout the country and often are expert witnesses in litigated matters. CTaSC produces tile installation specifications, provides job site field testing of various types, and provides on-site Quality Control services. Donato also founded the University of Ceramic Tile and Stone in 2002 that provides online sales, technical, and installation training courses.

Hopefully this article has given you some more perspective on the issue of installers. Following the trends of the employment situation, it seems that more young people are willing to and even going into the trades. If we all promote the trades and make candidates aware of them, we can recruit a new generation of installers. However, we must make them aware of their contributions to the industry and the marketplace. Being able to look back and say, "I did that" is a powerful driver and motivator. And we must appreciate and respect how hard installing flooring is and recognize the installer for their

accomplishments. None of them, new or old, want to do a bad job. If we keep them up to date, informed, engaged and make them part of the team, we can and will solve the installation shortage.

If you need help on a project beforehand with testing of the flooring material, have a failure that you need an answer for or have a question on anything related to flooring or substrates, contact us. We have the answers.



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