

Getting Out of a Service Hole

A service hole is created over time as a builder focuses on selling and building homes while warranty service waits for attention. Service holes are not the product of excessive demands from homeowners. They are an accumulation, a back log, of documented orientation items and uncontested warranty items. Service holes are created by a shortage of staff, time, and effective processes. Any builder can find himself staring into the abyss of a service hole, wondering how it got there. The question is, how do you climb out of this hole?

Recognize It

The first step is to recognize your situation. Symptoms include routine response times of over two weeks for inspection appointments and over four weeks for repairs. When nearly every communication from homeowners carries the sting of insult, when lists received by warranty are several pages long and include many complaints about orientation items that were never corrected, when third parties are called in by frustrated owners—*that* is a service hole.

Isolate the Assignment

Getting the company out of a service hole is not an assignment that can be tacked onto other regular staff duties. This is a special situation that requires a special plan and commitment. One or more people need to be set at the job full time, with no distractions—a service task force.

Alert Trades

The sudden emphasis on service work may startle some trades. An explanation is called for. This can be handled in a series of phone calls or memo outlining the problem and expressing your commitment to resolve it. Avoid scolding. Point out that it is in the best interests of everyone to meet this challenge.

Stop the Source

Make changes to reduce the supply of service items. Usually the warranty department is not the root cause. One culprit is delivering incomplete homes—the warranty staff inherits angry customers. As more time is devoted to reacting to hostility, less time is available for "normal" work, creating the self-perpetuating cycle characteristic of a service hole. By reducing items at their source, you allow the task force a realistic chance to cure the situation.

Manage Incoming Requests

Service holes get deeper when staff members are tied to the phone or their email so much they can't get anything else done. Yet communications from customers cannot be ignored; homeowners deserve to have their questions answered, their complaints aired. Have one or more persons screen calls while the rest of the team is out in the field meeting homeowners, doing repairs, or contacting trades.

Research

The phone person can set inspection appointments and between calls search for information needed by field people. Which trade contractor did which house? What is the paint number on

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that home? Where can we get screens to fit these nook windows? Searching for answers to such questions takes time. With support in the area of phones and information, progress will be faster.

Inspect

Meet with homeowners one by one. Listen, inspect, and make an honest estimate of the time for repairs. Inspections can be done faster than repairs. Organizing a schedule of certain days of the week for certain activities, or splitting work days into an office half and a field half may work.

Resist Extras

Resist the temptation to do extras in an effort to "make it up" to customers. When you are having trouble providing required service you are not in a position to do extras. Making Homeowner Jones wait for something he paid for, while Homeowner Smith gets something he didn't pay for makes things worse.

Expect a Brief Surge

When homeowners begin to see that items are being taken care of, expect an increase in their input. Folks who had given up hope will step forward to ask for their share. Stick with it. Inspect and provide service as needed, according to normal standards. Do what's right—one customer at a time, one detail at a time. Monitor of progress, including a review of trade contractor services, on a weekly basis.

At Last

As time passes the pressure lightens; progress is truly being made. Service energy can then be turned to making sure this doesn't happen again. Establishing successful, permanent service procedures—challenging as that sometimes seems—is much easier than crawling out of service holes!