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The Role of Communication

Editor's Note: This is the fifth installment of an eight-part series that looks at a dry standard and quality documentation.

In the previous article, we considered the value of returning a water damaged structure to a pre-loss condition or "dry standard." It addressed the benefits to all materially interested parties involved with the loss. In structures affected by a water intrusion, restoration to dry standard is especially important since elevated moisture levels are not always readily visible. If present, such moisture may compromise the integrity of the structure in addition to the health and safety of its occupants. In this article, we will discuss the importance of proper communication.

Communication

Whether intentional or unintentional, communication is always constant. The key to effective communication is to become aware of not only what is intended to be communicated, but also of how the other party might perceive the communication due to the method used to deliver the message.

Communicating accurately with others is frequently the issue that makes or breaks a project. There is no exception for restorers. Regardless of how correctly or skillfully the restorer completes the technical elements of the project, unless the client feels that

the project was done correctly, the end result could be disastrous. The challenge for the restorer is to communicate the message that the project is progressing as intended and that the work is being processed skillfully. This will do much to assuage any anxiety being experienced by the client.

Personalities can complicate necessary communication. Being a skilled communicator takes time and effort. Communication is not simply the ability to utter words. It involves being able to accurately relate a thought or concept while reinforcing the customer's trust and faith in the restorer with professional communication. This is true regardless of what form the communication takes (e.g., speaking, writing, behavior). Being able to explain complex matters in understandable terms to individuals who lack complete comprehension of the subject is essential!

Documentation

Today, because of liability issues, accountability and customer expectations, documentation is a form of communication that is as important to master as verbal communication. Documentation that provides a record of everything that has transpired on a project is an indisputable aid to the communication process.

Our industry has become more complicated because interested parties have a heightened awareness of how serious some issues that accompany water intrusion can become. For years,

we have struggled with clients who diminished the seriousness of such perils. This resulted in restorers being a little less attentive to the contents of the restoration file, which is vital documentation. Many restorers also did not see the importance of returning all the materials back to their pre-loss condition. As a result, some structures were left wet. Today, restorers are often required to defend the actions and choices made during the restoration project. Whether it is to ensure that the structure has been returned to pre-loss condition or to justify their bills, documentation is essential. Without thorough documentation of all restoration activities, the restorer's legal position and professional standing can be seriously compromised.

As clients become more educated and aware of the consequences of incomplete drying, they will continue to challenge the restoration process and restoration results. The answers that will assure them that the project has been completed properly will be supported by thorough documentation. This will also affect how they perceive the restorer's communications. It should therefore be understood that the customer will be evaluating the entire restoration process based upon this critical pillar.

To effectively use documentation as a tool in communication, one must comprehend its purpose. The restorer must ensure that any documentation is easily understood by all materially interested

parties. Documentation will most commonly serve as the platform through which homeowners, adjusters or other parties will receive communication. Some critical questions that need to be answered are:

- What was wet?
- How wet was it?
- Is it drying?
- Is it *dry*?

For years, restorers have focused very heavily on the inspection of materials to answer the first three questions . . . with a measure of success. The focus of the restoration effort was primarily placed on speed and not thorough, complete drying. Recently, a heavier focus has been placed on the final question, “Is it *dry*?”

For the restorative drying contractor, this target of ‘dry’ is defined as the moment the hygroscopic materials have attained normal equilibrium moisture content, or a “dry standard” (IICRC S500, 1999). Some refer to this as a condition of ‘pre-loss’ moisture content. This is important because without first establishing the drying goal as we learned in the previous article, the restorer will have no clear direction on how to process the drying project. This relates heavily to effective communication because when the restorer has no clearly communicated point of completion, he has no way of communicating the achievement of that goal.

Drying goals must be clearly documented and communicated. By documenting these numbers, a restorer can clearly start answering all four drying questions noted above, including the final and most critical question: “Is it dry?” Not until there is documentation to indicate that all

materials have been returned to their “dry standard” can the job be declared complete.

Restorers can submit what seems like an unlimited amount of paperwork outlining agreements, equipment choices, placement, performance records, daily moisture levels and in some cases continuous environmental data logging. This documentation can help show which way the project is moving, but will this really provide the conclusions sought by a critical individual? What if daily readings show values that are unchanging over a 24-hour period? Is that acceptable? When comparing the readings to “normal” or “dry,” what proof is provided that the “normal” or “dry” reading (especially when obtained from another material in the affected structure) is in fact representative of a “dry standard”?

Comparative testing techniques would most certainly be much less defensible than a carefully calculated conclusion with a predetermined target based on materials that have been equalized in “normal” environments. Being able to demonstrate a high level of accuracy in established drying goals will ultimately become critical if the restorer hopes to effectively communicate that the finish line has been crossed. ■

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Want to learn more? What document is provided to the interested party that outlines this conclusion that the restorative drying project was, in fact, ultimately dry? The next article in this series will address the essential technical restoration report and the components that give any technical report value.