

FROM THE FIELD

My mentor

BY DAN FOLEY CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Since the early days in 1987, when I began my career in the mechanical trade as a summer helper, I've been blessed with the guidance and support of many, many people. The list would be too long to print in this column.

I worked at Arlington Heating & Air Conditioning from 1987 to 2002. My former bosses and owners of the company, Tom and Linda Croker, were like a second set of parents to me. They afforded me opportunities I would've been hard pressed to find anywhere else, for which I'm grateful to this very day, and always will be. Most of what I know and practice in my business, I learned while working for them.

We should all establish a connection with someone we can look to for guidance as we formulate our ideas, philosophies, and business practices. Growing up, I had the benefit of a strong, disciplined father who happened to be a Marine Corps colonel. The threat of his size 10^{1/2} on my backside kept me on the old straight and narrow in many ways.

In the business world though, one mentor stood out among others: Woolye M. Croker, who founded Arlington Heating Co. in 1944. He was the father of Tom, my aforementioned boss.

Mr. Croker sold the company to Tom in 1978 but, fortunately for me, never really retired. He would come to the office every day and handle pet projects. When I began my career in 1987, Mr. Croker took me under his wing, and from him I learned much more than just the heating and air conditioning trade.

Saturday mornings were our time together. We would never meet at the jobsite. Instead, we would meet at the office and always take his car, with me driving. This was our ritual. Looking back, this routine gave us time to talk about the job and chat about many other things too, as we drove.

Early in my career, with the help of Mr. Croker, I sold my first job and worked on the installation. It was a simple job: a furnace and AC change-out in a small

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duplex. That next Saturday morning we rode to the site together so he could inspect the project. I beamed with pride as he quietly surveyed my work, nodding in approval. As we were leaving, the client offered to make payment by check. "Not necessary," I answered. "We

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have an accounting department and they'll send you a bill."

We got back into Mr. Croker's car. He looked at me and said, "Danny, did that client just offer you a check?"

"Yes," I responded.

"Never, never turn down payment when a customer offers it!"

I managed a meek "Yes, sir."

"Now go back in there and get it," he said.

I thought to myself, "He cannot be serious." But he was. I sheepishly knocked on the door and asked for that check.

On our way back to the office, he shared stories about starting in the business during the Great Depression and the struggles he went through. He talked about collecting "five dollars here and ten dollars there" from builder clients on a Thursday so he could make payroll on a Friday.

He gave me perspective on the kind of economic challenges I had never experienced. I learned that in this business, cash is king, and I learned never to turn down money that is owed to you.

Another time I was part of a crew installing a system he had sold. We had a particularly bad day, as some of the fittings got installed out of place. "Plumb and level" would not have been an accurate description of the results. The system worked, but it was not our best effort.

Nonetheless, we looked at it, shrugged, and I remember mumbling something about not being able to see it from my house. Who cared what it looked like if it worked? The next day we noticed that the same job was back on the calendar.

"There must be a mix-up," I said to Mr. Croker. "We finished that job yesterday."

"Yes," he replied. "And now you're going back to do the job right."

He never yelled. He never raised his voice. He never chastised. He didn't need to, as his disappointment was apparent. It cut through me and the lesson was learned.

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There's only one way to do the job: the right way. That was more than 20 years ago, and the lesson stays with me.

One day Mr. Croker sent me to a friend's house in North Arlington to give an estimate on a replacement system. The original system was designed by Mr. Croker back in the 1950s and was still operational — an old water-cooled Carrier system with a belt-drive compressor. Since this would be a fairly complicated job, I was both amazed and impressed that Mr. Croker sent me there on my own.

Not wanting to disappoint his trust in me, I must have spent two hours in that basement looking around, measuring, figuring, and thinking. I went back to the

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office and spent more time formulating a plan for replacement. I came up with an elegant solution and typed up the contract. The next day I met with the owner to review my proposal. We sat at his kitchen table to go over my proposal, and then I asked for the job.

The owner scowled at me and said, "You don't have a clue what you're talking about, this will never work. Get Mr. Croker out here now."

I skulked back to the office. We set up an appointment for the next day and returned. I kept my mouth shut and watched as he confidently surveyed the job, explained his solution, closed the deal, and took possession of the deposit check.

We got back in the car and on the way back I said, "Mr. Croker, your solution was identical to mine."

"Danny," he answered, "it's not what you said, it's how you said it."

Thinking back and comparing my presentation with his, it hit me. Being a rookie, I was still unsure of myself, and the owner immediately picked up on my lack of confidence. Mr. Croker's calm, cool demeanor and self-assured presentation was in stark contrast to my unsteady projection. Another lesson learned.

My skills developed over time, not overnight, under the tutelage of this master. I couldn't have asked for a better teacher.

Mr. Croker died in 1996 of a heart attack at the age of 83. He was driving to the office to do what he loved. I had the honor of being a pallbearer at his funeral.

Looking back, he was so much more than a business mentor. He was the grandfather I never had (one of my own died before I was born, and the other died when I was very young). I cherish the Saturday mornings we spent together and wish we could have had more. I wish that while he was alive I had articulated more clearly to him how much he meant to me, and I hope that he still knew.

Who is your mentor? Who brought you along when you were a rookie? While none can replace Mr. Croker, I have several other mentors too, that I rely on to this day. We should let them know how much we appreciate them and how important they are. And, of course, pay it forward and be that mentor to others who are learning. ●

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