

Don't Get Sick: Post-Topping Out Syndrome (PTS)

Executive Summary. A major milestone to a building project is its "topping out". This can be the beginning of losing a great project, so when you get there make sure to keep your foot on the accelerator!

What is "topping out"?

Topping out is a term used to describe the time at which the erection of the structure has been completed, or the highest point has been reached on a structure. Whether it's the last concrete pour in a concrete frame, the last steel beam being erected, or in the case of the photo above, the last precast plank being flown into place, it is certainly a major milestone. The celebration is signified by that last element (the beam or the plank) being flown into place with a pine tree on it. It happens on other structures, like tall bridges, but it is more common in building jobs.



Topping off ceremony at UConn. This photo was taken from www.today.uconn.edu and is the 2015 topping off at their Next Gen Hall by flying a flag and an oak tree.

It's psychological. There have been studies and studies and studies on labor productivity. Much of this has been on working conditions such as overcrowding of the work area, ripple effects of changes, overtime, weather, et cetera, et cetera. 'Morale and attitude' has been acknowledged as a contributor to production, but not studied nearly as much as these more tangible characteristics of the work in the previous sentence. PTS certainly falls into this category of something being difficult to measure. The drive to get to the top of the building and check that box of "building erected" is a strong contributor to high production.

Don't let up near the end or after. We've all seen the video of the runner that celebrates too early and takes 2nd place. This can happen in construction too, except taking 2nd in a race can equate in construction to diminished production, or worse, getting someone hurt.



This runner celebrates early and takes 2nd place. This is comparable to celebrating the topping of a building too early and either hurting people or losing money.

Have no fear, I have the solution! Are you kidding me? Of course I don't have the solution. An academic would tell you to create new goals, stay positive, and continue to create a productive environment. That all sounds great on paper, but for a 40-worker crew who has been working 6-10s for five months in sideways rain, a cold beer and a sincere thank you from the CEO and project superintendent may hit the mark. Getting to the building was a feat in itself, but the harder work starts the next day to maintain some aspect of that dopamine high the craft and management crew just came off of.

My real advice. I do believe strongly that morale on a job makes a huge difference. I can't give you a hard statistic. I can't point to a production curve. But I'm going to guess that somewhere between 82.2% and 91.4% of craft and management surveyed would say that the 'rah-rah' factor is a significant variable in maximizing production on a construction project.

My story. I spent some time recently talking to two production engineers at an ENR Top 25 company. They take in all sorts of data and shared with me what I stated above. They both said there's a study to be done on the effects of a positive work environment. They shared with me that some Owners are creating "a place where people want to work." This attitude by an Owner can attract and retain workers, and also serves to contribute to happier workers and better production rates!



Work safe!