



Certified Genius

When vetting candidates to complete a home renovation, certifications and other means of self-improvement may be telling indicators of a contractor's character.

"ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL," AS JEFFERSON FAMOUSLY WROTE IN THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE. THE SAME MAY NOT NECESSARILY APPLY TO ALL HOME CONTRACTORS.

"In Pennsylvania, all you need to become a registered contractor is a couple hundred dollars to show proof of liability insurance," says Dennis D. Gehman, MCR, the founder of Gehman Design Remodeling in Harleysville. "For most of us, our house is the biggest investment we will make in our lifetime, and we're trusting the contractors we hire to treat it with care. By and large, most contractors know what they're doing, but I wish Pennsylvania would have some kind of test to prove their competence, both on the construction side and on the business side."

As many as 50 percent of startups fail within five years of founding the business, according to the Small Business Administration, and Gehman suggests that number is far higher in the construction trade. In other

words, a homeowner who has a problem with a renovation after the fact might be in for an unwanted surprise when they learn that the contractor who did the job is no longer around to address the issue.

So, how would a homeowner know if a particular contractor deserves their trust? Gehman suggests a contractor's efforts to obtain notable certifications may be a telling indicator. For example, he has earned Certified Remodeler, Certified Kitchen and Bath Remodeler, and Master Certified Remodeler designations from NARI, the National Association of the Remodeling Industry.

"I had 15 years of trade experience when I started this business, but I had zero business experience," Gehman recalls. "When I got the CR certification, it was a 16-week class—10 weeks focused on construction and six weeks focused on business acumen. It taught me how to read a balance sheet, what to charge, the whole hiring-and-firing side, and client man-

agement. We had been in business for two years when I earned the certification, and it definitely made a difference between being a success and being one of those statistics."

Many of Gehman's team members have become certified, too; both of his sons, for example, have earned Certified Kitchen and Bath Remodeler, Certified Lead Carpenter, and Certified Remodeling Project Manager designations. Gehman has since become an instructor himself, devoted to helping other contractors become certified through NARI.

NARI is not the only game in town, however. The Environmental Protection Agency requires contractors to become Certified Renovators in the use of lead-safe work practices during renovations. Likewise, a number of manufacturers provide online certifications and continuing-education tools that go beyond the scope of their proprietary products.

Gehman considers continuing education "one of the most important things a contractor can do." In this regard, he is excited about the return of in-person trade shows, where he not only learns about new products that may yield a better on-the-job outcome but also networks with fellow contractors who can share best practices. He gets similar satisfaction and education by reading industry journals such as *Fine Homebuilding* and *The Journal of Light Construction*.

"Continuing education is also a requirement for renewing many certifications," he adds. "Some continuing education is easy, like attending NARI meetings, sitting in on webinars, and reading books and trade journals. NARI also wants you to get involved with the community, whether it's the chamber of commerce, the local church, or some other way to give back. As anybody who gives back already knows, there is some work involved, but you always receive far more than you give out."

Gehman's best advice to any homeowner: "Do your due diligence before choosing a contractor." In addition to asking prospective contractors about their certifications, do not be shy about asking challenging questions that may provide a window into the contractor's character.

"We need to earn your trust before we get your business," he adds. "Ask for references. Every contractor will put you in touch with clients for jobs where everything went perfectly, but not every project goes that way. I encourage people to inquire about those projects when something goes the way it shouldn't have, and ask, 'How did Gehman handle it?' That's how you find out what kind of company you're dealing with." ■

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