

◀ Josh Shelton, owner of Shelton Plumbing & In-Line Renewal Solutions, stands in front of one of his work trucks near their company headquarters in Alle-Kiski Valley, Pennsylvania.

Built on Service, STRENGTHENED BY FAMILY

Real-world strategies for scaling smart, training better and keeping teams engaged drawn from one family's remarkable business evolution

By Suzan Marie Chin-Taylor | Photography by Nate Smallwood



**Shelton Plumbing & In-Line Renewal Solutions,
Alle-Kiski Valley, Pennsylvania**

OWNER
EMPLOYEES
SERVICES

Josh Shelton
20

SERVICE AREA
WEBSITES

Residential & commercial plumbing; sewer, water & gas line repairs; sewer inspections & compliance repairs; trenchless rehabilitation (CIPP, epoxy, vertical stacks); trenchless equipment & materials; hands-on and field training; tech support & diagnostics; equipment repairs & rentals (expanding)

~15-mile radius

johnsheltonplumbing.com
in-linetrenchlessshop.com

W

hen Josh Shelton talks about plumbing, leadership or the future of the trades, he's not speaking from theory. He's speaking from a lifetime spent absorbing the values, work ethic and resourcefulness that shaped Shelton Plumbing, long before he ever considered taking over the business his father founded the same year Josh was born.

"My dad started Shelton Plumbing in 1983," Shelton recalls. "He grew the company to around 20 employees at one point, but he found out that he didn't really enjoy the management side. It got out of his control, and he decided to downsize."

For more than a decade, his father, John Shelton, operated as a one-man shop, just him, a truck, deep roots in the Alle-Kiski Valley and a loyal customer base built on trust, craftsmanship and doing right by people. Those years became, in John's words, "the best times of his career" because he regained control of his schedule and re-centered the business around service.

But eventually, a decision had to be made about the future. One day John approached Josh with a direct question: either take over the business or he would sell it. It wasn't a path Josh had expected.

TURNING A RELUCTANT BEGINNING INTO A CALLING

Despite spending his childhood summers digging, repairing and tagging along on plumbing jobs, Josh never planned to become a plumber. "I didn't choose the plumbing path because I spent my childhood helping my dad to make money and I just didn't really like plumbing when I was a kid," he admits.

He also didn't choose college; instead, he chased work, any work, traveling the country doing labor-intensive jobs at fossil fuel and nuclear power plants. He describes himself then as someone who "loved to work," but not yet someone who had found his purpose.

The turning point came quickly after his father's ultimatum. "Two weeks later, I was enrolled in plumbing school and never looked back," Josh says.

From the first day in the field as an apprentice, everything changed. Working beside his father not only taught him the trade; it reshaped their relationship. "Those first two years were such an eye-opener. I got to go into his world and see what he did to provide for the family, the sacrifices he made. It built a bond we never had before."

One moment in particular stays with him. Struggling to solder a joint and bristling at his father's offer to help, Josh found himself suddenly alone on the job site. His father had walked out without a word. Three hours later, John returned, not with anger, but with a lesson. "He just looked at me and said, 'Okay, are you ready to learn?' That moment was life-altering. I knew I had to swallow my pride."

The lesson stuck. From then on, Josh committed to mastery, not just of plumbing, but of humility, patience and teamwork. He became the apprentice who anticipated needs, studied processes and refined every movement. It's still how he trains his team today.



▶ Frank Roberts keeps an eye on the video screen as he inspects the sewer line with a Hathorn camera reel.

A FAMILY COMPANY IN THE TRUEST SENSE

By the time Josh earned his journeyman's license and eventually his master's, Shelton Plumbing was growing again slowly, intentionally, and with family at the center. His sister Sarah joined to run the office. His brother-in-law Denny came on board. Later, his uncle joined the related trenchless operation.

People often ask him how he manages working so closely with family. His answer is unwavering: "I think it's the greatest thing ever. Family are people you can always trust. You can rely on them."

Trust is a theme that recurs throughout Josh's leadership philosophy, trust in the people you hire, trust built through accountability and trust earned through service. It's also a value he learned from watching his father, whose reputation in the community was not just as a plumber, but as a man who gave endlessly of his time to churches, missions and disaster relief efforts. "He could have retired a millionaire," Josh says. "But he gave it all away, time, money, dedication to people." The business itself became an extension of that service mindset. I get to honor my father by doing everything I can to continue his legacy.

FINDING HIS FOOTING AS A BUSINESS OWNER

After nearly a decade focused solely on technical excellence, Josh reached a new realization: to grow, he had to understand business.

In 2018, he began working with business coach John Laslavik of ThistleSea Business Development. "For the first three years, I thought he was talking another language, P&Ls, balance sheets, personalities, DiSC profiles," Josh says with a laugh. "But you can't advance yourself or grow a company if you don't have people guiding you."

This period marked the transition from skilled technician to strategic leader. Understanding people, not pipes, became the real growth curve. The shift to developing his team, building processes and learning to delegate would ultimately lay the foundation for the innovations that came next.

▶ An employee with Shelton Plumbing uses a Picote Maxi Miller drain cleaning machine on a job site. (Photo courtesy Shelton Plumbing)

INNOVATION BENEATH THE SURFACE

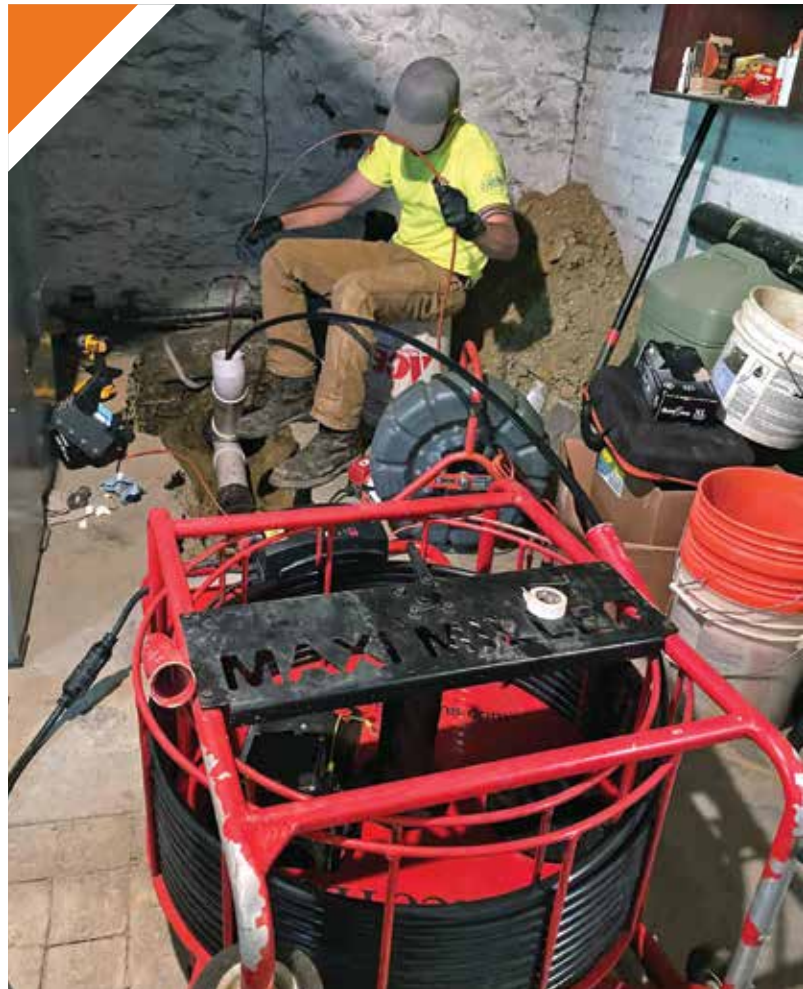
As Shelton Plumbing grew, Josh gradually shifted from traditional plumbing work into areas requiring higher skill, more technology and stronger problem-solving. It wasn't a strategic plan at first; it was a response to the needs of the community.

"We started purely based on service and repairs," Josh says. "My dad was huge into remodeling but over the years, I saw that wasn't the most profitable area. I want the most for my team, better trucks, good equipment, bonuses. That meant shifting our services."

The shift accelerated as local regulations changed. Western Pennsylvania's sewer inspection requirements for home sales created a surge in demand for repair, rehabilitation and replacement of failing sewer lines. That opened an opportunity and a challenge.

WHY TRENCHLESS BECAME THE GAME-CHANGER

Before trenchless methods were widely available, repairing underground sewers meant major disruption:



saw-cutting concrete, jackhammering basements, gutting finished spaces and performing labor that was not only grueling but dangerous.

“Years ago, projects took six, seven, eight days with saw-cutting, jackhammering, hauling everything in and out,” Josh explains. “It was hard, backbreaking labor. We called it the bucket brigade.”

The human cost was real. As an owner-operator, Josh took it upon himself to handle the highest-risk tasks. “I

was the guy in the trench box, the guy climbing the roofs, doing things that were the most unsafe because I felt like I owed it to my people. I can fix plumbing; I can't fix them.”

Shelton started with trenchless technologies like Perma-Liner CIPP lining, Picote epoxy brush coating, and later, light-based lining systems and LightRay UV Technology. UV changed everything for the business. “With trenchless, we do bigger jobs faster. Some projects that used to take eight days, we now do in three or four,” Josh says. “Efficiency is up, profitability is up and my guys couldn't be happier.”

Efficiency wasn't the only motivator. Safety, customer experience and preserving property all played equally important roles. In the hilly, dense, older neighborhoods surrounding Pittsburgh, traditional excavation is often impractical or impossible.

“You have sewer lines under driveways, under retaining walls, under hundred-year-old trees, even under a neighbor's driveway,” Josh says. “You can't just excavate that. Trenchless provides a better product and a better experience.”

THE CASE THAT PUT SHELTON ON THE MAP

One project in particular reinforced the power of this new approach. A Realtor contacted Josh with a desperate



▲ Shelton Plumbing technician Frank Roberts, left, uses a Hathorn camera reel while company owner Josh Shelton uses a Picote Maxi Miller drain cleaning machine as they prep a sewer line for trenchless lining installation.

problem: a fully finished basement, tile floors, game room, bath, laundry, all areas underneath had failed the sewer inspection. Two contractors had already told the homeowner the basement would need to be torn apart. What happened next became part of Shelton Plumbing's company lore. “We completely renovated everything under that floor through a 2-by-2-foot opening in a utility space,” Josh recalls. “We lined everything under that floor in a day and a half.”

The homeowners were stunned. The Realtors were stunned. Even the city inspectors were stunned until Shelton Plumbing submitted a detailed CCTV report documenting each lined section as required for compliance. “That was a major turning point. People realized this was possible,” Josh says. “It changed how we do business.”

WHEN THERE'S NO PLAYBOOK, YOU BUILD ONE

When Josh first embraced trenchless, the industry wasn't structured the way it is today. There were no Facebook groups, no massive online communities and few resources for troubleshooting. “We didn't have anybody to call,” he says. “Everything we developed for ourselves is now part of our training curriculum, how we plan jobs, how we use equipment, why we choose one method over another.”

That hands-on experience of solving problems in the field with limited support gave Shelton Plumbing a deep understanding of the tools they used. It also opened the door to a new business opportunity.

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◀ Frank Roberts sets up the Hathorn camera reel for job site usage.

natural,” Josh says. “The retail part is just the byproduct of the service.”

The model is simple: Help plumbers choose the right equipment, train them using real-world scenarios, provide phone support when they're stuck, repair equipment fast and keep people working.

Behind this is a lesson born from Josh's early days in trenchless — he doesn't want others to struggle for five years learning what he had to learn alone. “There were so many pieces I didn't have access to like materials, repairs or rentals. Now we fix everything we sell. We diagnose over the phone. Sometimes we get parts out the same day.” In short, he built the resources he wished existed when he started.

FROM USER TO TRAINER TO SUPPLIER

Rob Larsen from Manufacturer/Waterline Renewal Technologies began to notice the Shelton team's growth and the increasing demand created by Pennsylvania's regulations. As the local need outpaced the capacity of national suppliers, Josh found himself serving as a bridge between technology makers and the plumbers who needed these solutions.

That evolved into In-Line Renewal Solutions, a full-service equipment, training and support resource for trenchless contractors. “I've lived a life of service in plumbing. Moving into the service side of supplying equipment felt

GROWING BEYOND THE REGION

Although In-Line Renewal Solutions is strongest in the Northeast, the company supports contractors from Florida to Michigan to New England. “We don't put restrictions on ourselves. We find a way,” Josh says. One contractor recently drove four and a half hours to have a piece of equipment repaired. “We had it done in 30 minutes and he was back on the road. That's what service looks like.”

The momentum continues to build. Josh hints that 2026 will bring “some pretty cool plans” for expansion and enhanced service capabilities.

Everything DiSC to Build a Stronger, More Communicative Team

As Shelton Plumbing grew, owner Josh Shelton discovered that technical skill alone couldn't create the culture, efficiency and teamwork he envisioned. What made the biggest difference was a tool many contractors have never considered: Everything DiSC, a behavioral assessment that helps teams understand how people naturally communicate, respond to stress and make decisions.

What DiSC Stands For

DiSC categorizes communication and behavioral tendencies into four primary styles:

- **D – Dominance:** Direct, decisive, action-oriented. Motivated by results; stressed by slow processes, inefficiency and overexplaining.
- **I – Influence:** Social, expressive, collaborative. Motivated by relationships and enthusiasm; stressed by isolation or overly rigid structure.
- **S – Steadiness:** Patient, supportive, consistent. Motivated by stability and teamwork; stressed by rapid change, pressure or abrupt communication.

- **C – Conscientiousness:** Analytical, precise, methodical. Motivated by accuracy and clear expectations; stressed by ambiguity, rushed timelines or emotional decision-making.

Josh learned through coaching that every person on his team leans toward one or more of these styles, and understanding those tendencies is essential for effective leadership.

Using DiSC to Improve Communication and Avoid Unnecessary Conflict

One reason Shelton Plumbing adopted DiSC was to reduce internal friction, especially during handoffs between office staff, field technicians and management. Team members now recognize that misunderstandings often stem not from disagreement but from differing communication needs:

- Some team members want the what and move forward.
- Others need the why or the step-by-step how before they feel confident taking action.
- Some prefer quick decisions; others need time to process information.

LEADING PEOPLE AND BUILDING CULTURE

For Shelton, running a successful plumbing and trenchless company has never been solely about technical skill or equipment. It's about people, understanding them, developing them and trusting them.

After years of working closely with a business coach and implementing tools like Everything DiSC to improve communication and team dynamics, Josh now views leadership as a practice rooted in adaptability.

DiSC stands for Dominance, Influence, Steadiness, Conscientiousness. People have one dominant communication style or a combination. "As a leader, you almost naturally become a chameleon," he says. "One day I have to be a D, the next day I have to be an I. When you understand your people and how they communicate, you know how to energize them."

Running two companies and nearly 20 employees meant he had to evolve into someone who could connect with every personality. "When you know yourself and your team members, things really start to excel," he says. "We now manage things and we lead people."

A CULTURE OF SUPPORT, NOT BURNOUT

One of Josh's core philosophies is protecting his people from the burnout he experienced earlier in his career. The company no longer markets itself as a 24/7 emergency service provider. They have on-call staff, but they prioritize sustainable workloads. The result? Higher morale, better performance and a culture built on mutual support.

Recognizing these differences helps prevent shutdowns, frustration or misinterpretation.

DiSC also provides a shared language for addressing conflict in a productive, nonpersonal way. When disagreements arise, the team can pinpoint whether the issue stems from style differences such as pace, detail level and decision-making preferences rather than viewing it as a personal clash.

Understanding motivators and stressors allows supervisors and peers to communicate in ways that bring out each person's strengths. This has strengthened trust across departments and helped Shelton Plumbing maintain high performance without burnout.

By integrating DiSC into onboarding, training and daily leadership, Shelton Plumbing has built a culture where people feel seen, respected and supported. The result is better teamwork, smoother communication and a workplace where employees stay engaged because their needs and strengths are understood.

“My team does an insane amount of work each day, but they’re not burned out,” he says. “When we add team members, the whole company feels like it just got a major break even though we’re actually doing more.” Maximizing time and efficiency, rather than maximizing hours, has become a defining metric of success.

WHAT SUCCESS REALLY MEANS

While revenue and profit matter, Josh is clear that profitability is essential to providing good wages, tools and equipment and he doesn’t measure success by dollars alone. “I think too much weight gets put on money. Society says



▲ On of Shelton Plumbing’s service vans the company uses. The company has 20 employees.

success is based on how much money someone made,” he says. “But I look at success as, ‘Have I outdone myself?’ What areas can I be better in this year, next year?”

For Josh, it always comes back to people. “I’m nothing without my people. I’ve got a bunch of trucks and equipment, and I can’t do anything with it if I don’t have them.” Whether it’s technicians in the field, family members in the office, or contractors calling In-Line Renewal Solutions for guidance, relationships are the common thread that sustains both sides of the business.

DELEGATION, TRUST AND LETTING GO

If there’s one lesson Josh wishes he’d learned earlier, it’s that delegating isn’t losing control. It’s gaining more of the time and freedom needed to lead effectively. “Learn to delegate and learn that it’s okay to let things go,” he says. “If other people don’t do it your way, it’s okay. If they make mistakes, that’s okay too.”

He knows firsthand how hard this is for plumbing business owners, especially those who started as technicians. “Once you’re an owner-operator, it’s hard to trust people and let go because this is something you built with your

own two hands,” he admits. But the reward is immense. Delegating builds people. And as they grow, the company grows.

INVEST IN PEOPLE, INVEST IN YOURSELF

The most meaningful successes Josh points to aren’t financial milestones but human ones, watching employees advance their skills, seeing them gain confidence and helping them achieve goals in their own lives. “If I can help a person, it might take two years to develop them. But the time and energy you put in will help you, and it will help them,” he says. “It’s a reciprocal relationship.”

At the end of the day, he believes no contractor will look back on their life wishing they had spent more time at the office. “We’re going to be asking for our families, the people we care about,” he reflects. “Our people, our family, that’s the most important part of it.”

A BUSINESS BUILT ON SERVICE, CARRIED FORWARD BY PURPOSE

From John Shelton’s humble one-man operation to Josh’s multi-faceted plumbing and trenchless enterprise, the throughline has always been service, to customers, to employees, to other contractors and to the community. “We’re forced to understand people if we want to be efficient and productive,” Josh says. “Once you do that, everything starts to fall into place.”

The future looks bright for Shelton Plumbing and In-Line Renewal Solutions. Demand for trenchless technology continues to rise, and Josh is already planning the next phase of expansion. But even with major growth ahead, one thing remains unchanged: the company’s commitment to serving others with integrity, innovation and heart. As Josh puts it: “The more you invest in others, the more you give back to yourself.” 📌

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