

Mark Breslin  
Training Column

## ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS: THE SEEDS OF DISCONTENT

According to almost every national workplace survey of employees, over 50% of people report that they are unhappy or discontented with their jobs. Is that number surprising to you? Or are you too one of the 5 out of every ten? I find these numbers incredible, alarming and plainly obvious; especially in our industry.

Why has nearly every craft adopted a Code of Conduct or Excellence? Why do most collective bargaining agreements need drug testing provisions? Why do performance, attitude and behavioral problems exist on our jobsites? I think it is because many people / employees do not feel that anyone personally cares about them. I think it is because they carry the baggage of their lives into the workplace. I think it is because we begin by asking the wrong questions of everyone, starting with “**what** do you want to be?” (when you grow up) instead of “**who** do you want to be?”

I think we can do great things with this information.

My view of this is colored by my own personal experiences. Mine was a very typical upbringing combining an absent father, economic hardship, and a “going nowhere” peer group. That did not set me up as a confident, secure, forward thinking young man. Just the opposite and it came out in a lot of attitudes and behaviors that I look back upon with regret. I took that anger, frustration and self-doubt with me everywhere including the workplace. I needed to prove everything to everyone no matter the collateral damage. It is tough to be a happy person or a fulfilled worker if you don’t know or care about yourself.

My salvation was a couple of older men who took a personal interest in me. Call it mentor, guide, father figure, or coach, the net effect was that someone cared enough to help me see who I could and should be. And through their lessons, guidance and inspiration I was able to (very slowly) transform myself into a person I could value and be proud of. And what do you know, my work performance turned stellar and I became very motivated and highly focused (and relatively successful). Damn, who’d have thought? Sure as hell not me.

My point is that we are not just shaping attitudes and behaviors or enforcing codes of discipline for industry market share or contractor profits. I think that it is not always that we have “bad people” or “bad workers” in our industry; we do have many people whose lives are not as they envisioned it. Seeds of discontent that they in turn wear on their sleeve and in their performance. No matter what it looks like on the outside, it always starts inside the individual, often in a place no one goes, not even that person themselves.

We are in the business of shaping lives through values and ethics. We have a remarkable opportunity to serve as those mentors and guides for many who may never have had one,

or who may even have given up on themselves. For many we are their last opportunity to see themselves in a mirror of capability, potential and self-confidence. That was the reasoning behind writing my book Survival of the Fittest. I found out first hand that it doesn't matter **what** you are trying to be in the industry, if you aren't focused on **who** you are going to be as a person. It must be the man or woman before the trade or the skills every time.

Many of you reading this have lived this story. I sincerely hope that you will always remember the privilege and obligation you have taken on. There are few others who are in positions to so profoundly effect so many young individuals at a personal level. Reach across the divide. Do not mistake their quiet for disinterest. Do not mistake their attitude as a lack of hunger for someone to care about them. Do not give up on those that are under your care and guidance. For it is us, by simple compassion, patience and understanding, who can not only change the attitudes and behaviors of an industry, but deliver many from the seeds of their discontent.

Mark Breslin is a strategist and author specializing in labor-management challenges. He is the author of the Survival of the Fittest and Organize or Die. He addresses more than 50,000 labor and business leaders each year in North America. More on his work and profile is available at [www.breslin.biz](http://www.breslin.biz).