

2/2008  
Training Column

### Changing Our Story

If you surveyed a hundred sets of parents in society today and asked them what success looks like for their children, what answer would you get?

If you surveyed a hundred school counselors and asked them what success looks like for their graduating high school students, what answer would you get?

If you asked academics, legislators and others who hold sway on the court of public opinion and resources, what answer would you get?

That the kid earns a college degree. This would be the common identifier.

And I would venture to say that not one of them would identify a high paying, highly skilled trades career as the definition of success. Simply put, our industry image and story are deficient and unattractive.

Ask anyone who has not been on a jobsite, about a job in construction, and they are going to likely describe old stereotypes and images of an industry that has evolved. But everything from media images to our own lack of imagination continues to stand as obstacles to our attracting an enthusiastic crop of young people to join our industry. Now I know this is not the case in some communities, and having had generations of construction in my own family, I know there are exceptions to every rule. But simply put, it is time for us to articulate and illustrate the opportunities of our industry in a more strategic manner. And to do this I have three very specific suggestions;

1. Change our story.

Every apprenticeship program in the United States and Canada needs to become accredited to issue college credits. In doing just this one simple thing, we remove almost all parental and school counselor opposition to construction as a career destination. Why do most people join the military? For the educational benefits associated with service. Why not take a page from their long-standing recruitment approach and change our story profoundly. "Hey mom and dad, I am going to learn a trade and get a college education. I am going to graduate making \$ 50-60-70K and have an A.A. (or close) degree too." The apprenticeship programs in North America can stand up to nearly any junior college curriculum in terms of value, curriculum and scope of instruction. If we simply change our story a little, we can push aside pre-conceived notions of our industry that are outdated and create a dual track for those who want and need it.

## 2. Communicate the Construction Career Pyramid.

Being an apprentice is just a start in the industry. Anyone with some smarts and ambition has unlimited opportunities from there. Journeyman. Foreman. Superintendent. Project Manager. Area Manager. Estimator. Operations Manager. President and Owner. With the demographic shifts occurring in our industry, younger people are going to be running our industry faster than ever before. The leadership opportunities within the next decade are going to be unprecedented. The opportunity will be there. The money will be there. The upward mobility will be there. It is time to communicate this more effectively. We are not just building a highly skilled workforce, we are building an entire industry of field, office and management prospects.

## 3 Pay more for talented prospects.

The average union apprentice in our industry is 28 years old. What the hell are we doing trying to pay these people \$ 13 per hour? Are you kidding me? Many apprentices have to take a pay cut to get into their programs, but at 28 years old people have obligations, family and other financial challenges. Some will argue they have no practical construction skills at that point so why pay more. My take is that you have to pay for the future potential or you get the bottom of the barrel whose current market value is low and remains low. We are competing for talent with almost every other industry. Law enforcement, military, technology, energy, rail and transportation and many other industries are not going to start someone at some marginal wage and make them wait five years to make a living. Perhaps apprentice rates need to come up two or three dollars. Perhaps they don't need full blown family health or pension benefits and these can be converted to wage. Find a way to put it in their pockets earlier or we are going to lose many prospective stars to other industries.

In summary, we are going to have to do better than the old "booth at the high school job fair" in the future. We are going to have to borrow lessons from the most sophisticated and successful organizations in North America if we want top talent. And it starts with something ever so simple. Changing our story.

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Coming soon a new Breslin Book for apprentice instruction : **Million Dollar Blue Collar: Managing Your Earnings for Life and Work Success.**