

TRAINING ARTICLE

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The Roots of Kindness, A Culture of Respect

One of my previous articles really kicked up some dust. I heard from many readers regarding the treatment of apprentices. The responses came in two categories; traditional and progressive. As such, I'd like to explore each of these viewpoints a little closer.

My premise is that the construction field culture is totally outdated and unacceptable. We have decades of what some call 'tradition' where apprentices must pass the test of 'manhood' by being hazed, abused, disrespected or ignored by the journeymen and sometimes foremen. This long standing practice of abuse, the guy beneath you is something that had been passed down generation to generation. And in my view, this should be the last generation engaged in this stupid old school practice.

I hear from many traditional guys that if you do not make it tough for the apprentices, they will never make it. I hear that this type of treatment is how they were brought up in the trade. I hear that 'it is good for them'. I hear that this is the way we do it in construction. Fine. I will accept that is how some people see it, but I don't agree.

The old saying is true, 'the hotter the flame, the harder the steel'. And I am a product of that fire myself. But truly what do we think we are getting as an end result by allowing, tolerating or engaging in mistreatment of apprentices? I spoke to over 30,000 apprentices last year and more than half raise their hand to admit this is their workplace fate. Do you think this leads to more motivated people? Do you think they acquire skills and abilities faster? Do you think that negative reinforcement breeds loyalty to union and employer? Do you think that these practices enhance productivity and professionalism? Some do. I don't.

What of the progressive viewpoint? Well, these are people who wrote and stated that they too had seen or experienced this. They agreed something different must occur, but did not have a solution and asked for ideas. Well, let me share what I believe to be three solid ideas to create a more productive and positive construction culture.

1. Apprenticeship Staff Focus

Staff at the apprentice level must prepare every young person going to the field for this type of experience. They must help them by discussing the options the apprentice has ; what to say or do and how. Apprentice training staff as well as business managers and agents should take a hard line with guys who are engaging in this practice when it is reported. Most likely the apprentice will never say a word, so who else would be there to protect their workplace experience?

2. Union Leader Focus

The guys engaging in the harassment and hazing tend to be older guys who had that same thing happen to them. They do not realize that they are directly impacting their own financial future. Part of the reason the journeymen act this way is out of fear that the apprentice will take their jobs. So instead of mentoring them for success, they ignore, push or pressure them instead. The reality is, with the imminent retirement of the Baby Boomers, that these young people will be paying for the “old dogs’ pensions. If these young people are not successful at sustaining the market, what will the direct impact be to these guys who have spent thirty years in the trade. They are hurting their own post-career prospects. Union leaders need to draw this picture, color the dots, drawn the lines and then whack them with a 2x4 until they get it. Recently, I asked a group of more than 800 foremen how many of them were actively and personally mentoring some young person for future success. Only 14 responded that they were doing it. You can be damn sure that more than 14 journeymen are hard assign the guys on those 800 crews; and the net effect on our industry and future is not positive.

3. Foremen Training

Forman are often not prepared to deal with the “soft-skill’ side of their job responsibilities. It is not their fault since many have only their own personal experience to apply in their current positions. Foremen are the center point between labor and management in the development of our human resource potential. They are the ones who really are responsible for cultivating talent and motivating performance. We need to aggressively expand our supervisory training programs to help them understand how to get the most out of their crews. Can they yell. Hell yes, when needed. But are there other ways to get the best out of people. Hell yes. Any very successful and profitable company has a performance bar that has consequences for failure, but it will usually also have a culture that recognizes, cultivates, rewards and praises more often than anything else.

In summary, it is really not too hard to understand the concept. Do you get the best from you own kids with a backhand across the face or an arm around their shoulder? Do we pass on the mistakes that were made in our personal and professional development or do we try new ways to get better and more positive results? No matter if you are old school or progressive in where you are trying to go, for the idea of applying some common sense in trying to change our culture, the time has come.

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