



Oklahoma Adjusts Apprenticeship— Two Generations, One Goal

By Nic Bittle

AT A SMACNA BOARD MEETING in Oklahoma City, Okla., the following questions were on the table:

- Who will be the industry's next leaders?
- What generation will fulfill workforce requirements?
- What will happen to our company, and our industry, and the union (SMART local 124) if the next generation of talent is not prepared for the challenge of change and the tasks ahead of them?

Answers? The room grew very quiet.

Soon afterwards, the conversation shifted from “We can’t afford to train this next generation of leaders” to “We can’t afford not to!” One participant summarized it: “If we’re going to provide a superior service, we must take the necessary steps to ensure we are working with a superior work force!”

Not Like Us

How can the industry accomplish the objective of superior service? A shift in mindset and a commitment to a long-term solution is an investment that will pay—in many ways—for years to come.

Like many other markets across the United States, Oklahoma City has begun to see a decline in the education of journeypersons graduating from the apprenticeship program. Although their technical skills may be sufficient, new graduates seem to exhibit attitudes, habits, beliefs, and behaviors that are not consistent with the work ethic and work effort of generations past.

While it’s easy to fit large groups of people into cubbyholes, it seems to many that the typical “Generation Y” apprentice—born between 1980 and 2000—is of a different stripe.

These individuals run their lives with a different mindset than those in the “Baby Boom” generation. And it’s the Boomers who run the majority of construction companies.

It’s not an exaggeration—or a gloomy assessment—to conclude the recruiting, attracting, training, managing, and motivating today’s workforce is far different than in years past.

Communicating Across the Gap

So how do we bridge the gap between the generations? Working together through their JATC, local 124 and the SMACNA of Oklahoma brought in a consultant—me!—to assess the situation and provide a solution.

My proposal was three-step process outlining a path for the present and the future:

1. Complete an assessment of the current Apprenticeship Program,
2. Develop and implement a curriculum, using a pilot semester, and
3. Roll the customized curriculum out to all students in the apprenticeship program.

Moving Forward

After careful assessment, we determined to include four content modules in the pilot semester:

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- Professionalism,
- Communication,
- Entrepreneurship, and
- Leadership.

These modules focus on best practices—from improving communication, leadership, listening, conflict resolution, and financial skills to developing integrity and character, showing respect, taking initiative, and enhancing courtesy and general appearance.

There’s never been a better time to rethink and retool the educational curriculum to cover both the technical and non-technical requirements of the job to create better leaders and managers—and take advantage of the unique talents inherent in members of Generation Y.

Along the way, sheet metal contractors and SMART leaders in Oklahoma City came to these conclusions:

- It is no longer good enough to just do the job.
- What got us here will not get us where we want to go.
- Now is the time to create a different approach to creating a superior workforce.

“If we’re going to provide a superior service, we must take the necessary steps to ensure we are working with a superior work force!”

Fast Forward

Currently all four years of apprentices in Oklahoma City are going through this curriculum. Twice a month, they are participating in a remote lesson that is laser focused on one of the four core competencies. Thus far, it is going well. More than 90 percent of the apprentices are actively engaged in the process and the material. Still, the question remains, are apprentices really transforming into leaders?

Current leadership in Oklahoma City understands that changing the mindset of an individual is no quick fix. At the core, what we are really doing is giving apprentices what they need to know and what they need to do in order to make better decisions in life and on the job. Thus, we did not expect to see any positive results within the first couple of years.

Perhaps we were too pessimistic.

Initial response by apprentices has been heartening. We’re already seeing behavioral changes in the apprentices. Many of them are considering the consequences of the decisions they make.

A few weeks ago I asked the apprentices what they have changed as a result of our time together. Below are a few of the responses that I received.

- “I have been working on saving money as best as I can. I’ve started bringing my lunch every day instead of going out to eat, which has saved anywhere from \$50 to \$75 a week. I never really noticed how much I spent on lunch and breakfast, but the extra \$200 to \$300 a month I am saving helps me chip away at my savings goals. I know it’s not much, but at least I’ve made a bit of a change for the good.”
- “I have consciously tried to make two changes as a result of our topic conversations. The most drastic would have to be understanding and altering how my body language affects the way others perceive my attitude. The other change is trying to accept criticism without taking it personally and; in turn; trying to learn something from others’ criticism.”
- “My focus has been mostly on lesson one: Be the solution to every problem that we run across. It has paid off! I have had a great response from the foreman that I work for!”
- “Recently I had the opportunity to accept not-so-constructive criticism from my journey-person. As I was about to defend myself and snap back, I could tell by his demeanor—and the fact that we were in front of other journeymen—that if I were to take such action there would be no good ending in sight. I’m thankful for that lesson on body language because his face and his tone talked to me as clearly as if he were saying “this isn’t the time or the place to challenge me now!”

Most of the apprentices in Oklahoma City have sent me similar responses.

These changes have happened over the course of a few months. Imagine what can happen after each apprentice works through this professional development program for a few years! ■

To hear more about this process contact Nic Bittle at nic@nicbittle.com.