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'The Apprentice' Sheet Metal Edition

Perspectives from the industry's up-and-coming

By Cairine Caughill

Unless the organized sheet metal industry wants to be “fired,” its apprentices need not only technical skills, but also leadership aptitude and business knowledge. Typically that means getting them out of their comfort zones, watching, talking with, and listening to peers, journeypersons, leaders, and their management partners.

That’s exactly what happened in Las Vegas earlier this year, when apprentices competed in the International Training Center’s International Apprenticeship Contest and participated in the Partners in Progress Conference.

Months later, they are still thinking about and applying some of the lessons learned and looking forward to the 2014 Partners in Progress Conference. “Many good seeds were planted,” says Bryan Hunckley, a third-year apprentice from SMART local 33 in Cleveland, Ohio.

Partnership

As improving technical skills is usually top on apprentices’ lists of things to do, few of those who attended the conference were aware of the extent to which SMACNA and SMART cooperate. They were impressed, however, and eager to strengthen the partnership.

“Coming in as an apprentice, you know you’ve got to go to work and learn the trade, but there’s a clear line between management or the owner and labor,” Hunckley says.

“I’ve realized that we are truly in this together. We make money for management and their making money keeps us working. It’s a symbiotic relationship. We’re not enemies.”

Hunckley believes that interacting with contractors was what really drove the point home. “When you are isolated—just going to work and coming home, it’s easy to forget.”

** The International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers (SMART) was formed with the merger of the United Transportation Union into the Sheet Metal Workers’ International Association.*



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Pritchard agrees and adds that “mingling with contractors and a lot of other union members and listening to their ideas opens your mind.”

This sort of “mind-altering” experience is what Blaze March of Wisconsin’s SMART local 18 thinks all apprentices need. “Learning how contractors and foremen see things helps us now and in the future.”

That’s especially true for SMART local 66’s Yuriy Kosmin, who says he’s gained insight into what it takes to be a leader. “It’s clear that the things you need to be good at change as you move up.”

And regardless of where someone is on the ladder, he or she needs to consider how generational differences affect learning and working. SMART local 66’s Paine says he thinks he can use such information to work more effectively on teams.

It’s the kind of lesson that Chris Wilson of Michigan’s SMART local 80 took to heart. “We can train each other informally. The more we each put into our work, the more we get out of it. Everyone needs to take action.”

Hunkley took home to Cleveland what he learned at the competition and the Partners in Progress Conference. “I think I’m better prepared when issues arise. I’m more likely to stop and go to the source for clarification. If the owner wants things done a certain way, I have to try to understand that point of view,” he says.

Foremost in his mind is: “How can we work together to get this job done right so you can get your money and I can stay working?”

Market Expansion

One of the focuses of the Partners in Progress Conferences is always potential for market expansion, and apprentices were particularly interested in fire/life safety and green projects.

“Most of the contractors in the Cleveland area are very ‘single track’ in their focus; thus, it was an eye-opener to see how some contractors have expanded into new areas,” Hunkley says.

He says the experience permanently changed his mindset, and he now finds himself thinking about possible areas of expansion, but thanks to his Las Vegas experience, he’s not ignorant about the effort required to effect change.

“If you want to get into a different market, and take on different kinds of work, you have to be prepared as a union and train guys to do it.”

Pritchard looks forward to the challenge. “The more versatile we are, the better we’ll survive because there’ll be more work out there.” ■

Caughill is a freelance writer based in Ontario, Canada.



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