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Belonging and Excellence Program Creates a Place for Everyone in the Union Sheet Metal Industry

A joint initiative between SMACNA, SMART, and the ITI is focused on recruitment and ensuring the best candidates understand they belong in sheet metal.

The Belonging and Excellence for All (BE4ALL) initiative might just be the signatory sheet metal industry's most effective and progressive recruitment tool. Launched in December 2021 as a joint effort between the Sheet Metal and Air Conditioning Contractors' National Association (SMACNA), the International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail, and Transportation Workers (SMART), and the International Training Institute (ITI), it seeks solutions to age-old challenges around work culture and belonging, while benefitting the signatory sheet metal industry in many ways.

“Some of its intended positive impacts include reshaping the industry's work culture so that contractors attract and retain the best and most skilled workforce possible, regardless of race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or nationality,” says a statement from SMACNA. “It will also help contractors and Locals work together to meet the real-world demand for the best and most qualified workforce available for the industry.”

BE4ALL is guided by SMACNA and SMART committees, with the participation of the ITI. The groups meet quarterly to plan and coordinate BE4ALL activities across the North American signatory sheet metal industry.

Donna Silverman and Louise Medina are staff liaisons to the SMART BE4ALL Committee. Medina has been a sheet metal worker for more than two decades and is now the SMART Director of Special Projects.

“As a woman of color who has faced many barriers throughout my career, I feel it is important to get the message out to membership that we may need to change the way we say or do things to make others feel like they belong,” she says.

Silverman agrees, noting that unions should be a welcoming place for all people because it is the very foundation the labor movement stands for. “Taking part in this initiative will work towards creating an environment where every member will feel like they belong. This will increase productivity and solidarity, two central tenants that will contribute to retaining new members,” she says.

Jennifer Lohr, vice president, Fisher Balancing in New Jersey, sits on SMACNA's BE4ALL Committee. She says it is important for contractors to care about and be a part of this initiative because it is imperative to the trade's survival. “We need people of excellence, and in order to fill the void left by retirees in the

industry, we need to cast a large net and bring in all of the best talent,” she says. “The problem is, if we bring in this new talent and they aren’t treated with dignity and respect because of our biases—implicit or otherwise—we won’t retain the next generation of sheet metal workers.”

The initiative includes the ability to tailor and target programs and strategies to ensure that particular groups have what they need to reach the universal goal of belonging. The work of belonging will sometimes require difficult conversations, but it also requires treating one another with dignity, respect, and compassion.

“As important as it will be to understand what BE4ALL is, it will be equally necessary to understand what it is not,” says a statement from SMART. “It is not about blaming or shaming individuals or granting special treatment to one segment of the membership over another. The initiative is for *all* union members and contractors, the emphasis lying on every human being experiencing belonging, and it is clear this isn’t the case for some groups.”

But none of it is possible without labor and management cooperation to prioritize these efforts, coordinate the messaging, take proactive steps to prevent jobsite issues, and promptly address issues as they arise.

“Communication is key to maximizing the potential of BE4ALL, and building strong communication channels between SMACNA and SMART is a great start,” Silverman says. “Labor and management can begin having these discussions about issues specific to their local areas and how they can work together to address them.”

“When we do this important work together as a team, it will not get lost in the cracks,” Lohr says. “It will remain front and center until we have accomplished our goals in bringing in the brightest and best our country has to offer.”

Since its inception, BE4ALL has worked through the first three parts of a four-part agenda. For the past two years, program leaders have surveyed and interviewed leaders across the industry to better understand their hopes, wants, needs, and fears related to the BE4ALL work. BE4ALL conducted SMACNA, SMART, and ITI leadership training sessions focused on strategies for reducing bias and increasing belonging. During the third step—alignment—all three organizations converted the assessment findings into concrete action steps, which are underway for 2023.

But BE4ALL is not quick work. To reach the program’s goal, the industry must first collectively address barriers, including biases and stereotypes that everyone has internalized, most of the time unconsciously.

“These biases and stereotypes may stem from the places where we grew up, or the schools we attended, or the families in which we were raised, but they must be addressed,” Medina says. “BE4ALL is the pathway for how we get there.”

The International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers (SMART) and the Sheet Metal and Air Conditioning Contractors’ National Association (SMACNA) have a labor-management partnership that is more than 75 years old. The goal of these Partners in Progress is to maintain an effective cooperative effort that demonstrates their expertise in the heating ventilating and air conditioning (HVAC), architectural metal, and industrial sheet metal markets. For additional information, visit pinp.org

