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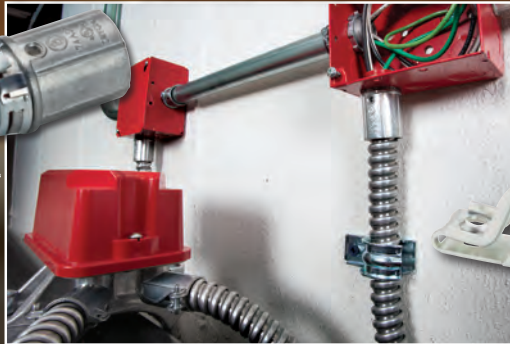
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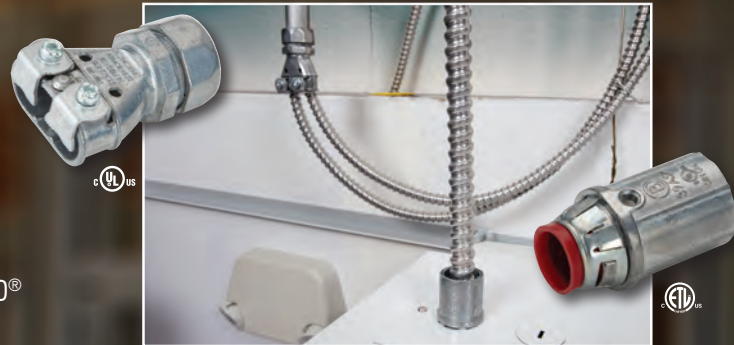


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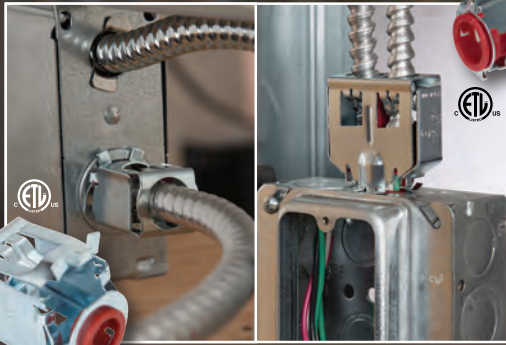
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LEADERSHIP
GUIDE

FEB. 20



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Illustrations by Mark Dane / iStock



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SET A COURSE TO LEAD

by guest columnist
Kelly Jones



IN JANUARY NAED LAUNCHED ITS Leadership Development Program, a rigorous, 12-month industry-specific curriculum designed to help participants identify and leverage their own authentic, effective leadership style.

More than two years ago, after a competitive RFP process, NAED selected Dale Carnegie as its partner for the program based on its long track record of quality and success, ability to customize the curriculum for the electrical distribution industry, and capacity for scaling the program as needed to meet our members' needs. As a result, the program includes the best of Dale Carnegie expertise, custom-designed for NAED members.

The program is for leaders at any level in any functional area of the business who are open to change and willing to grow and includes assessments, live and virtual class meetings, a capstone project, coaching, peer advisors, and a manager coaching guide. (Find much more information about the program in the features that start on pages 16, 22, and 30 of this issue.)

I'm thrilled to report that enrollment response for the program has been so positive that NAED is running two classes concurrently and accepting applications for a second class to begin later in 2020.

The first class includes a diversity

of experience, from new leaders to vice presidents; some participants are new to the industry, while others have 20-plus years of experience. Participants include men and women from both distributors and manufacturers.

When asked what drew them to this program, participants cited the industry-specific content and thorough curriculum, networking opportunities and opportunities to learn from peers, trusted NAED education quality, and Dale Carnegie credibility, as well as having a full year dedicated to professional development.

Enrollment in the program requires an executive sponsor. For additional information or to register, visit naed.org/leadership or contact memberengagement@naed.org.

NAED is proud to welcome the first class of the Leadership Development Program. We are looking forward to supporting these learners and applauding their success—now and in the future. ■

Jones is NAED's director of learning and program content. Reach her at kjones@naed.org.

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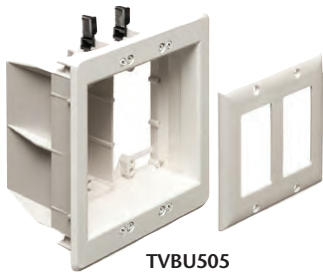
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HARD-WON LESSONS

by George Vorwick

WITH MY TENURE AS THE NAED BOARD CHAIR winding down, it seems natural to reflect on the opportunity I've been afforded to share my thoughts in this column. As I begin my sixth decade in our industry, we are confronted with an ever-expanding litany of opportunities competing for our attention and resources. We are each tasked with investing our limited resources to strengthen our value propositions, enhance our competitive advantage, and grow the value of our companies.

One of the challenges we share is the need to drive change within organizations that are built to repeat tasks hundreds—if not thousands—of times a day with great discipline. How we implement change can make the difference between moving forward and building on successes or remaining frozen in one place and potentially becoming irrelevant.

It is with more than 40 years in the industry and recently celebrating 10 years as the leader of our company that I share with you some of our hard-won lessons in managing change.

We have focused much of our attention on strengthening our culture and improving our customer value proposition, which led us to undertake a comprehensive review of our brand. We have also recognized a need to transform our executive leadership to prepare our company for the future. Like us, I'm guessing that you've undertaken similar strategies and have been more successful at implementing some more than others.

There is a big difference between knowing something needs to change and executing processes that create and sustain change. It takes time and we don't always get it right. I've made mistakes, like implementing initiatives without fully communicating why, thus delaying progress. I've also learned that it's not enough to explain why and what; it is equally important to cultivate champions of the change within our organization. It is also imperative to have an executive who is passionate about whatever new



Change requires leaders who possess a combination of patience, professional will, and persistence. We define leadership as improvement and believe you don't need to be the boss to lead.



direction we are contemplating, along with someone who will be responsible for execution.

Our plan to charge for services began almost a decade ago, but it wasn't until recently that this initiative became integral to our sales efforts and could thrive without our executive team's full attention. Selling services was so fundamentally different from our normal business that a few managers chose to leave because they didn't agree or fully appreciate our commitment to this strategy. That was difficult and stressful, but in hindsight it was also inevitable.

Change requires leaders who possess a combination of patience, professional will, and persistence. We define leadership as improvement and believe you don't need to be the boss to lead. We have hired people and consultants with the leadership skills we need to drive growth, and more often looked to leaders within the organization. These leaders have helped us to launch other initiatives like employee development programs, a brand refresh, on-demand delivery service, and expansion, and to develop myriad new digital tools.

While the choice on how to evolve and grow is unique to each of our companies and our cultures, the path change takes is fairly predictable because change will always encounter resistance. However, when we get it right, it is also extremely satisfying. Our involvement in this association is recognition that we find strength in working together and it is where we challenge one another to think big and dare to be bold.

Onward! ■

Vorwick is president and CEO of United Electric Supply, New Castle, Del. He can be reached at gvorwick@unitedelectric.com.



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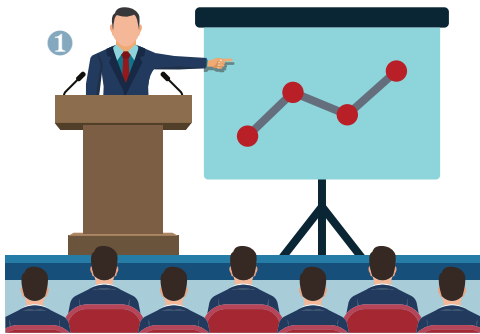
LEADERSHIP GUIDE

leadership
CULTURE takes
Shape

SIX BEHAVIORS, BELIEFS, PATTERNS, AND PRACTICES OF COMPANIES THAT ARE SETTING THE STANDARD FOR SHAPING TODAY'S WORKERS INTO TOMORROW'S LEADERS. *by Jan Niehaus*

Every distributor executive, management consultant, and MBA professor is likely to have a different definition of "leadership" and a different concept of what constitutes a "leadership culture." Here, observations gathered from

three leaders in the electrical distribution industry, coupled with management survey findings, offer a profile of an organization that exhibits the six most salient characteristics of a leadership culture.



1. LEARNING

With their unabashed demand for robust learning and development opportunities, Millennials have moved this topic to prominence during employment discussions. But the truth is, learning has long been a cherished perk for employees of all ages and the hallmark of companies that promote and demonstrate leadership, both internally and in the communities and industries in which they operate.

“At Van Meter, we believe that training and developing employees is an investment. Employees who are developing professionally have higher job satisfaction and are personally engaged. Well-trained, skilled employee-owners make better decisions and optimize our business success. Our comprehensive learning and development program, which includes in-person, webinar, video, and online learning programs, compares with top organizations in the country and serves as a recruitment and critical retention

tool,” said Lura McBride, president and CEO at Van Meter Inc., headquartered in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. She cited the company’s “expansive onboarding program and role-specific training initiatives” as examples.

Sales Manager Doug Ropp described links between Van Meter’s onboarding program and corporate culture: “The journey of the onboarding process with Van Meter is by far the best process in the industry, if not in all of business. The commitment to such a program is a testament to the leadership and culture of Van Meter, a true reflection of the culture we live every day.”

Alicia Murphy, chief organizational effectiveness officer, described another important Van Meter training program: “Our Grow Essentials leadership curriculum is a multiple-course program that our leaders attend throughout the year to increase their leadership skill sets. The primary components of Grow Essentials are (1) build your best team, (2) live our culture, and (3)

align to our company direction.”

Many distributorships set minimum annual training requirements for their employees, which sometimes vary by role or position. Electrical Supply Inc. (ESI), based in Tampa, Florida, typically allows work time for training activities, and Training Manager Nichole Gumiela makes sure that associates receive credit for every course, educational meeting, and industry conference they attend. “Electric Supply encourages training and development of all team members. We want our employee-owners to be empowered and take pride in their learning and accomplishments,” Gumiela said.



2. ENGAGEMENT

“Engagement” is quite the buzzword lately, and for good reason. As the opposite of detachment, engagement leads to increased productivity, collaboration, and profitability. Engaged employees take advantage of development opportunities, share their knowledge

Engaged employees take advantage of development opportunities, share their knowledge with colleagues, freely suggest thoughtful process improvements, refer friends for open positions in their companies, and stay with their employers longer.

with colleagues, freely suggest thoughtful process improvements, refer friends for open positions in their companies, and stay with their employers longer.

Here’s some evidence:

As ESI’s marketing manager and a member of the management team, Shariette Jones volunteers for projects that take her beyond her marketing specialty, including a strategic team focused on growth and expansion and a task force rewriting the company vision and mission. “It is my choice to step out and be involved in different projects outside of my daily responsibilities. I’m fortunate that my company supports that,” she said.

Participants in ESI’s Emerging Leaders Program form teams and create continuous improvement plans designed to generate revenue or savings of at least \$25,000. Every team delivers its plan in a formal presentation to an executive panel consisting of the company’s CEO/president,

COO, CMTO, operations manager, and board chair.

In companies with strong leadership cultures, not only are employees engaged with their colleagues, managers, and companies, but also associates, managers, and executives participate in the broader electrical distribution industry. For example:

→ **ESI's Jones** currently serves on the NAED Women in Industry (WII) Committee, planning the group's annual WII Forum.

→ **George Adams Jr.**, ESI board chairman, helped establish NAED's YET (Young Executives of Today) group, the predecessor of today's LEAD Conference.

→ **Shaker Brock**, chief marketing and technology officer at ESI, is on the NAED Adventure Conference Committee, planning the group's annual marketing conference.

→ **Wes Smith**, president of Mayer in Birmingham, Ala., is the incoming NAED board chairman.

→ **Charles Collat Sr.**, Mayer's chair emeritus, established the Charles & Patsy Collat Industrial Distribution Program in the Collat School of Business at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

Engagement also extends to an organization's involvement in the communities in which they operate. Nancy Goedecke, CEO and chairman of Mayer, is just one of myriad executives in many electrical dis-

tributorships who donate their time and talents to a wide range of business and nonprofit organizations. A true community leader, she was the first woman in the 93-year history of the United Way of Central Alabama to chair its annual fundraising campaign. She has also served on the board of directors of the Alabama Productivity Center, Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Alabama, Federal Reserve Bank, Birmingham Business Alliance, and Leadership Birmingham, to name just a few of the organizations that have benefited from her business savvy and generous spirit.



3. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Companies with strong leadership cultures consistently heap on the recognition and rewards.

Explained Gumiela: "It is important to compliment staff, to genuinely thank them for their contributions." In fact, *Fast Company* magazine reported in November 2019 that surveyed corporate employees value recognition that comes from their direct managers as "the most memorable and mean-



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ingful,” more so than recognition from top executives, customers, or peers.

Mayer’s largest recognition program is its annual Circle of Excellence Award program, which Ashley Self, director of learning and people development at Mayer Electric Supply in Birmingham, Ala., described: “Any associate can nominate a person for the award. A 12-member team reviews the nominations and selects winners. Members of the awards team serve three-year terms and then rotate off so that new people are constantly coming on. So many companies recognize sales, but no salesperson does it alone. We have winners in nine different categories: administration, community service, counter and inside sales, outside sales, leadership, operations management, operations support, sales support, and best team. When the winners come in with their spouses, executive team members pick them up at the airport. Winners tour the headquarters and meet the entire executive team. Dinner that evening is at a local club, where award winners are recognized individually by their managers and executive team.”

4. DEVELOPMENT

Training and development are inextricably linked, although development dives deeper, focus-



ing on long-term career building, often addressing personal as well as professional development.

“At Van Meter, we are devoted to creating a meaningful learning and development environment for our employees from their very first day on the job until their retirement day,” said McBride.

Based on the strengths and interests that emerge as ESI associates move through the company’s Emerging Leaders Program, Gumiela creates personalized career development plans for graduates. “A week after the Emerging Leaders Program ended, Nichole sent an email, asking about our experience, the things we took away, and the things we need to improve. Our answers are part of the personalized pathway for each of us to reach our job and career goals,” reported Leo Velez, utility sales rep.

Personalization and ownership play a key role at Van Meter as well, as Murphy explained: “We

have found that our process of having our employee-owners own their development and continually focus on personal and organizational progress creates natural leaders. Those employee-owners then can quickly and efficiently step into critical People Leader roles.”

Darwin Gillespie, branch team member at Van Meter, is on board: “Employee ownership means taking responsibility for growing individually and using my knowledge to grow our company.”

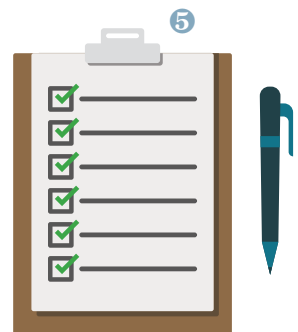
When Jones, Outside Utility Sales Rep Tiffany Coffie, and Credit Manager Michelle Smith returned to ESI headquarters from NAED’s 2019 WII Forum, eager to share their insights and enthusiasm for leadership, they formed—with CEO Harry Irwin’s full support—a new group: Women of Influence, designed to promote women employees’ professional and personal development. Every woman at ESI headquarters voluntarily joined the group,

which, as a side benefit, affords Jones, Coffie, and Smith opportunities to hone their planning and facilitation skills.

5. EXPERTISE

In addition to the professional disciplines represented in virtually every electrical distributorship (e.g., accounting, marketing), many companies are establishing specialty groups and divisions related to the products they sell (e.g., energy efficiency, datacom, automation). In these rapidly evolving sectors, ongoing education is essential.

Accordingly, Mayer sends its specialists to conferences and trade shows hosted by industry and professional organizations, such as BICSI (Building Industry Consulting Service International) and STAFDA (Specialist Tools & Fasteners). Mayer and many other distributors also encourage their specialists to earn and maintain relevant industry certifications and accred-

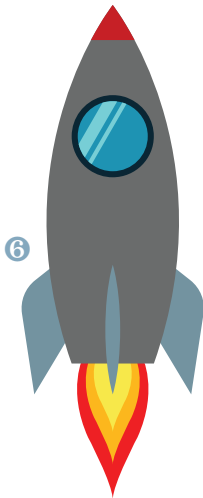


itations, such as RCDD (Registered Communications Distribution Design) from BICSI, LEED Green Associate from the U.S. Green Building Council, and CLC (Certified Lighting Consultant) from the American Lighting Association. Mayer, ESI, and Van Meter all send their professionals to NAED's annual Adventure and HR & Training Conferences.

6. RISK-TAKING

When Bamboo HR, a technology company that provides human resources software, surveyed executives and HR professionals, researchers discovered the importance of risk-taking in leadership cultures. In its infographic, the company reported: "Risk-taking is strongly linked to a well-liked culture. And when employees are given freedom to experiment and innovate in their work, beneficial discoveries often result." Ninety-two percent of the survey respondents whose organizations vigorously promote risk-taking like their company cultures. In companies where employees report little or no risk-taking, only 53% like their cultures.

Van Meter is on to something. "Through our cultural expectations, we empower a progress mindset: Our employee-owners are expected to improve our business. We hired them, as owners, to help us get better, grow, and



evolve. They don't need to ask permission to make improvements in their own work environments or suggest improvements in other areas of the company," said McBride.

Murphy concurred: "At Van Meter, leadership is a verb, not a noun. This creates an environment where everyone in the company has the opportunity to lead within their team, branch, department, and company. Our workforce is given the freedom and the expectation to improve their skills every day."

ESI's culture also encourages innovation, as Smith revealed: "I'm a manager, but I'm equal to my direct reports. I don't know everything. If they have a better idea, I'm all for it."

Mayer also welcomes innovation. "We have always had an entrepreneurial culture. People are empowered and have a lot of ownership. We want people to come forward with their ideas for process improvement," Self said.

A Leadership Culture Speaks for Itself

"Culture is such a big topic, such a big thing to bite off," Self explained. "We have a really solid culture at Mayer. I feel really good about our values and our leadership team." Self listed transparency, authenticity, and kindness as hallmarks of leadership. "Our leadership cares about their people. It is a lot easier to lead when you care," he said.

Mayer recently launched what Self calls a "talent review process," the first step in developing a comprehensive leadership development program. An industrial psychologist is currently interviewing se-

Work" award. McBride described how Tyler Carmer, who works in the Central Distribution Center, came to the company: "When he started his job search, his mom, who owns a deli in town, told him that he should apply for a job at Van Meter because the people from Van Meter who come in for lunch are always so happy, and they all seem to love the company and their jobs."

Before Coffie joined ESI, the company was one of her customers. "I had known the company for many years. They are very honest, and the bosses honestly do care about you and

Based on the strengths and interests that emerge as ESI associates move through the company's Emerging Leaders Program, Gumliela creates personalized career development plans for graduates.

nior leaders to identify the competencies that account for Mayer's standing as the 11th largest electrical distributor in the United States. "Then it will be a matter of replicating the values and competencies of our executives in other associates," Self said.

Van Meter has earned "Top Workplace" status for eight consecutive years and is a regular winner of the *Corridor Business Journal's* "Coolest Places to

home-life balance. It is not like any other corporation I've ever seen," she said. Coffie added two hours to her daily work commute when she joined ESI. She said, "It is well worth it." ■

Niehaus, LEED GA, is an instructional designer and writer and the president and founder of *Communication by Design* (communicationbydesign.net). Reach her at 314-644-4135 or Jan@CommunicationByDesign.net.



Off & RUNNING

PARTICIPANTS IN NAED'S INAUGURAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM LOOK FORWARD TO HONING SKILLS AND GROOMING THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS.

by **Susan Bloom**

As NAED director of member engagement and marketing, Catherine Viglione spends her days talking with members, gaining an understanding of their pain points, and helping to develop programs that proactively respond to their needs. "One of the most common concerns I hear from our members revolves

around the leadership pipeline within their organizations," she said of the conversations she's had with distributors nationwide. With many current leaders preparing to retire in the next five to 10 years and a growing talent gap, "We wanted to help fill that gap with an industry-specific curriculum that's im-

pactful today and in the future."

That goal has been accomplished with the January 2020 launch of NAED's Leadership Development Program, a new 12-month training course designed for existing and emerging leaders of any level and in any business function who want to enhance their leadership skills.

According to Kelly Jones, NAED director of learning and program content, the unique blended learning program includes two face-to-face meetings with dedicated instructors from Dale Carnegie (the official program partner); four live, virtual class sessions conducted online; one-on-one coaching sessions; ongoing peer sessions; industry-specific case studies; and a capstone project that participants will work on for the entire length of the course. "All projects are individualized for each student and relate to a real-life challenge that the learner is facing in his/her organization," Jones said.

The course was first conceived more than two years ago and is now officially open to classes of 15 to 24 students. Viglione is excited about the response the course has elicited from its target audience so far. "As of late December, we've registered so many participants that we will run two classes concurrently," she said.

"Once someone enrolls in the program, I schedule a brief call with them to make sure they understand the time commitment and answer any questions they may have about the course. The consistent feedback I've been hearing is that members are excited about participating in a program that's specifically tailored to our industry. That, coupled with the caliber of learning that Dale Carnegie is known for providing, make this program really enticing to members," said Viglione, who added that she's also been fielding a lot of questions around the course's capstone project and the expectations surrounding it. "Students seem really interested in tying the concepts they're learning back to their day jobs," she said.

Viglione noted that registration in the inaugural class has also reflected a solid mix of experience levels. "We have not only new leaders, but also people with 10 to 20 years of leader-

ship experience participating," she said. "We also have both distributors and manufacturers registered, so this first class is going to be exceptional. Participants will get to network with and learn from both our facilitators and one another."

Jones has been equally thrilled with the feedback. "We're especially proud to see the response to the rigor of the curriculum," said Jones of the course, which requires 60 to 80 hours of participant commitment over the span of the year. "We've promoted this course at NAED regional and talent development conferences and response has been great. We're pleased to see that the depth and structure of the program is being recognized and appreciated. Members want something that will differentiate them, and through this course they'll learn successful, time-tested leadership practices that are combined with current, hands-on aspects of our industry. It's a course they can't get anywhere else."

Focused on imparting leadership skills (as opposed to day-to-day management skills) through a range of workplace learning approaches, the

course will provide participants with instruction on everything from enhancing their customer experience and growing their company amid industry changes to improving employee retention, building emotional intelligence, increasing overall employee fulfillment/satisfaction, boosting company performance, and enhancing the workplace culture.

Industry Response

Several distributor registrants have been excited to share their interest in and expectations of the inaugural class. For Tim Kelso, learning and development coordinator at Springfield Electric in Springfield, Ill., the course offers important foundational information.

"I've taken many NAED courses and have attended a few NAED events and have generally found them to be very beneficial, especially now that some of them have been updated," he said. "I'm a big fan of Bottom Line Basics and feel that the course is extremely important for all distributor employees. The ability to have courses that focus on both the soft and hard



skills that our employees need tailored to our industry is a huge benefit to our company.”

Among the aspects of the Leadership Development Program that most appealed to Kelso and prompted his registration? “Dale Carnegie!” he confirmed. “Its courses are well known within the world of leadership training, so partnering with Dale Carnegie immediately gave the new Leadership Development Program credibility.” After attending the HR/Talent Development Conference in Dallas in early 2019, he said, “I got to hear the Dale Carnegie representative and Kelly Jones brief the course and I was thoroughly impressed and intrigued. As the training and development coordinator for Springfield Electric, I immediately saw the course’s usefulness and wanted to take it for a ‘test drive.’ It’s extremely important to build an organization’s ‘leadership bench’ and I’m hoping that this program can be a part of that initiative in the future.”

As someone who’s taken a plethora of leadership development courses (including two run by Dale Carnegie) throughout his career, Kelso added, “I’m hoping that the Leadership Development course can improve my understanding of the intricacies of the electrical distribution industry. I’m also really looking forward to the capstone project and am interested in seeing the benefits it delivers within my company and the industry. By attending the first iteration of the Leadership Development Program, I plan on assessing the course and its deliverables for future use with Springfield Electric associates to strengthen our leadership bench.”

“The most appealing aspect of the Leadership Development Program for me was the year-long format with two face-to-face sessions,” noted Rick Scates, vice president of sales at Stokes Electric in Knoxville, Tenn. “The training seems to be well thought out

and vital to my development in my new role. I hope to leave this training course a better leader—one who can help our sales team reach their potential and support our company in becoming even more profitable.”

Registrant David de Steiger, who’s successfully completed both NAED’s EDGE and EPEC Bronze courses and several online courses in the VIP Core track in the past, also has high hopes for the new leadership course. “I’m at a crossroads in my career and the timing matches up perfectly to my desire to expand my leadership skills,” explained de Steiger, vice president at Raymond de Steiger Inc., Sterling Heights, Mich. “I’ve taken a few Dale Carnegie classes previously and found them to be first rate, so I’m very excited to go through

the tailored Dale Carnegie-run program for our industry. In addition, as a member of the NAED LEAD Planning Committee for the past four years, this program directly ties in with our objective of advancing the LEAD Conference.” In terms of what he hopes to get out of the course, he added, “primarily, I want to become a better leader to take my company to the next level.”

A Great Addition

Viglione said that she’s personally excited for the opportunity to watch current Leadership Development Program participants grow over the course of the coming year. “If you’ve ever followed someone’s career or helped them develop personally and professionally, there’s a tremendous

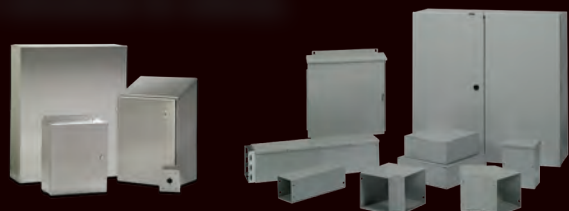
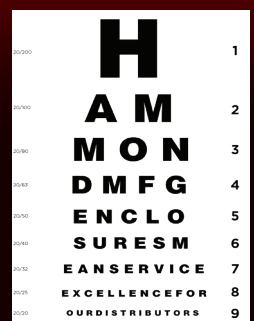


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A Tie-in to LEAD

Five core competencies form the foundation of the NAED Leadership Development Program, and the curriculum is designed to help participants “embrace, embody, and exemplify” each one—goals that NAED’s annual LEAD Conference helps support and build on.

“The cost of the LEAD Conference is built into the Leadership Development Program and we’ve co-located them so that the second face-to-face session of the program happens at LEAD in July,” NAED Director of Learning and Program Content Kelly Jones said of the tie-in between the two initiatives. “We want program participants to go to LEAD to expand their peer network of other leaders.”

According to Jones, upcoming LEAD Conferences will focus on one specific competency from among the course’s five core competencies each year. In addition to bringing this brand-new structure to LEAD Conferences in 2020, “Leadership Development participants will find that this five-year summatic rotation at LEAD enables a more in-depth look at each competency they learned,” she said. “In addition, you can now attend the LEAD Conference five years in a row and have a completely different experience each time.”

NAED Director of Member Engagement and Marketing Catherine Viglione agreed. “LEAD is designed to be a stand-alone leadership development conference that takes a deep dive into a different leadership competency each year,” she said. “Participants could attend for multiple years and not get the same level of instruction that they’ll get as part of NAED’s new Leadership Development Program. The two programs are designed to complement each other, but each program has unique strengths that make them an important part of one’s leadership journey.”

As another perk, “Leadership Development Program participants can count on some exclusive activity or access while at the LEAD Conference,” Jones said. “LEAD will also become a hub for Leadership Development Program alumni each year.” —S.B.



sense of pride that comes along with helping others succeed,” she explained. “I hope that both the participants and their executive sponsors have that same feeling by the time this inaugural class graduates in December 2020.”

“The new Leadership Development Program is a great addition to NAED’s training portfolio,” said Kelso. “Dale Carnegie courses have consistently yielded results in the past and I’m a big fan of the organization’s leadership methodologies.” By partnering with NAED, he said, “students will garner the Dale Carnegie leadership skill sets and be able to apply them to the world of electrical distribution.”


Scates agreed: “I think that leadership training for this industry will raise the bar and help electrical distributors train their future leaders so that we can become a stronger industry for tomorrow.”

“Good leadership is fundamental to everything we do,” added de Steiger. “To my knowledge, the Leadership Development Program is one of the most comprehensive and deepest trainings NAED has ever offered.”

“As an organization, we’re all thrilled to see this program come together,” Jones concluded. “It’s exciting to be able to offer something that’s needed and that we know will be a transformative experience for all participants.”

Enrollment in NAED’s 12-month Leadership Development Program, which runs each year from January to December, requires an executive sponsor. For additional information or to register for the program, visit naed.org/leadership or contact memberengagement@naed.org. ■

Bloom is a 25-year veteran of the lighting and electrical products industry. Reach her at susan.bloom.chester@gmail.com.

A silhouette of a person stands on a hillside, looking out over a vast city at night. The city lights are a mix of warm yellow and cool blue, creating a vibrant contrast against the dark sky. The person's shadow is cast on the ground in front of them.

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SPECIAL
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C R I T I C A L



COMPETENCIES

NAED'S
LEADERSHIP
DEVELOPMENT
PROGRAM
UNPACKS AND
EXAMINES
THE FIVE CORE
STRENGTHS
NECESSARY TO
TURN TODAY'S
EMPLOYEES INTO
THE THOUGHT
LEADERS OF
THE FUTURE.

by
**Carolyn
Heinze**

Developed in conjunction with Dale Carnegie Training, the NAED Leadership Development Program is a 12-month, intensive, interactive learning experience that combines face-to-face and virtual sessions with one-on-one coaching. Exercises include vision setting, 360° self-assessments, and numerous other activities designed to develop and enrich the skills required of today's leaders. Built into every component of the program are five competencies identified as the core of effective leadership today. "These five competencies form the foundation of the new Leadership Development Program curriculum and are embedded in the assessments, case studies, and capstone project," said Kelly Jones, director of learning program content at NAED.

COMPETENCY NO. 1

**BE OKAY WITH THE GRAY—
EMBRACE AMBIGUITY**

We're often told that good decisions are made when the decision makers have all the facts on hand. The problem is, these days the rules of the game are constantly changing—and with them, all of the factors and variables that one must consider before arriving at a decision. When learning this competency, leaders will develop strengths that will allow them to accept that things are not always black and white... and not just to go through, but grow through the gray.

This mind-set requires leaders to encourage more risk-taking in their organizations, noted Jacqueline Wilson, vice president of client engagement at Dale Carnegie Training of St. Louis. "Things are changing, and we don't know exactly how to deal with it, so we're going to have to promote people to take some calculated risk to move with the changes," she said. "That's something that can be uncomfortable in a traditional setting because we're usually measured on how right we are all the time."

Making the transition from taking fewer risks to taking greater—albeit calculated—risks to move with change mandates some pattern adjustment. "This is a very, very experiential program where every segment and module will talk about [participants] making commitments to do things differently, so we'll look at different ways we can adjust our patterns and commit," said Billie Bright, certified master trainer and corporate business consultant at Dale Carnegie

of St. Louis. At first, these pattern adjustments may be simple tweaks—a participant might, say, start taking a different route to work each day—but they're designed to get people comfortable with breaking the mold.

During these sessions, participants will also be asked to examine their organization's relationship with technology and how it contributes to creating gray areas. Tech has definitely made a number of things easier: Communicating, serving customers, and managing productivity have all become a lot more streamlined in a connected world. But what

Embedded into every component of the NAED Leadership Program are five competencies that the developers...have identified as the core of effective leadership development today.

technology will really make a difference at a given electrical distribution company? Are certain processes best left low tech? What tasks should be automated? And which other tasks could then be elevated as a result of automation? What's the best way to leverage technology across all branch locations? In pondering these questions, leaders are better positioned to take the risks they need to take, think creatively, and motivate others to work toward the future vision.

At the same time, however, it's necessary for leaders to understand that every tech-related decision has an impact on people. And with the amount of data technology provides us, sometimes the waters get muddied; this information may be solid and in abundance, but what does it actually mean?

"We're getting all these insights, but it's so new that nobody knows [what to do with it]. What's the data we should be looking at? What should we not be looking at?" said Elizabeth Haberberger, president of Dale Carnegie Training of St. Louis. Today, tech has the capability

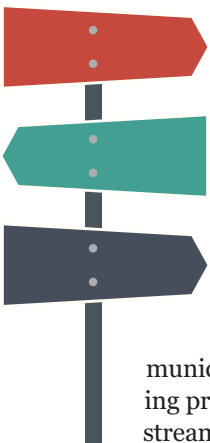
of providing distributors with granular information related to customer demand and warehouse logistics, for example, enabling them to make more finely tuned decisions. "But they're all decisions that are going to impact the human capital of the organization. And that's where the tricky part comes in, because data is data—it is what it is—but humans have hearts and minds, and that's the tough part of the decision-making process."

Being "Okay with the Gray," Haberberger said, helps people get comfortable with the fact that they may not always know exactly how they're going to arrive at their end goal. "We've got a very specific end goal, [and] we are going to have to be pretty flexible in the way that we get there. And it might work this way, but it might not, and if it doesn't, we're going to have to take a different route."

COMPETENCY NO. 2

**FROM ME TO WE—COLLABORATE
WITH OTHERS**

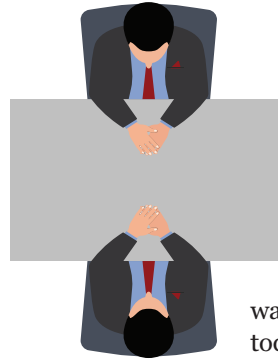
The days of "Do as I say because I'm the boss" are long gone. "People are refusing to be managed, [whereas] years ago, it was very autocratic," Bright said. "People want to be led and to be inspired, and this competency is all about learning how to be motivational and how to be inspiring—how to get people to do the things that they will



then want to do because they are happy about doing them. You really can only manage processes. You can't manage people—but you can lead people.”

Not only are people less and less receptive being ordered around, but also in many cases, businesses themselves (oftentimes the most successful ones) have done away with hierarchy in favor of developing cross-functional teams that work in collaboration toward the end goal. What's more, younger employees who are making their entrance into the professional world are expecting to work in an environment where collaboration is promoted not just among team members, but also in partnership with suppliers and customers. As a competency, “From Me to We” focuses on developing leaders that can take the focus off of themselves and distribute it throughout their organization in the interest of leveraging the strengths of every team member for truly effective collaboration.

“Working cross-functionally is no longer a ‘nice to have’; it's a necessity as organizations get bigger and technology creeps in,” Haberberger explained. In the past, organizations operated as machines: Something arrived in one end,



each cog in the wheel did its part, and the final product emerged. She said that companies are now transforming into organisms. “In an organism, things are constantly changing and growing and moving and adapting. If you want to be successful in business today, you have to be more like that organism and you can't do that alone—you've got to have a strong team around you.”

“From Me to We” has participants taking a good look at themselves, Wilson noted. “You're going to have to know yourself really well, and you're going to have to look at your strengths and opportunities to grow.” The NAED Leadership Development Program begins with a detailed self-assessment that has individuals examine who they are and who they intend to be, as well as collective discussions that reveal how others function. All of this contributes to helping people understand the keys to effective collaboration.

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EMBRACE, EMBODY, EXEMPLIFY: COMPETENCY HIGHLIGHTS

■ Competency No. 1

Be Okay with the Gray—Embrace Ambiguity

Embrace: Ambiguity is part of business today. There will not always be black-and-white problems, solutions, and answers.

Embody: Leaders are willing to take risks when the outcome is unknown and apply an optimistic, positive, and forward-thinking mind-set in dealing with uncertainty.

Exemplify: Leaders help others through uncertainty and change. They use an innovative and creative approach when working on issues, and they influence others to follow them.

■ Competency No. 2

From Me to We—Collaborate with Others

Embrace: Collaboration is increasing—and necessary—to complete initiatives. We must surround ourselves with high performers, and all departments must work together to achieve goals.

Embody: Leaders are open to the ideas and opinions of others and are willing to go against their own ideas and ask themselves, “Why might I be wrong?” They work to build genuine relationships with others and think about the impact they have on other departments in the organization.

Exemplify: Leaders listen and act on the ideas of others. They spend time coaching and developing others based on their strengths, and they work with all departments to achieve strategic initiatives.

■ Competency No. 3

Boldly Step Out—Be Vulnerable and Transparent

Embrace: We must be ready to go first and be

“By looking at themselves and how they tick and understanding how other people tick—what makes them show up, what motivates them—they’re going to be able to collaborate at a much higher level.”

COMPETENCY NO. 3

BOLDLY STEP OUT—BE VULNERABLE AND TRANSPARENT

While transparency is an oft-applied term in business, the word “vulnerable” makes some leaders uncomfortable. This competency, however, is not focused on having program participants share their darkest secrets with the rest of their peers; instead, it encourages leaders to explore the benefits of allowing employees, business partners, and customers to see them for more than just their title.

This is important in organizations that are far-flung. Many electrical distributors have personnel scattered across corporate headquarters and regional branches and out on the road at client sites. In this environment, face time between leaders and their teams is at a premium; when it does happen, it’s wise to make the most of it.

This means that today’s leaders need to be willing to communicate not only their wisdom, but also how they obtained it. What mistakes have they made? What have they learned from those errors? What have they been really successful at, and why did they succeed? Team members are hungry for this information: Just who are they working with? What’s their vision? How can I best contribute to that vision?

The electrical distribution industry spans several decades, and the leaders in this industry have had their fair share of successes and failures already. In “Boldly Step Out,” leaders will learn to gain confidence while admitting their errors and owning up to their decisions. They will also explore how opening up to employees helps everyone:

If one lets people understand how one thinks, the whole team has a better chance at collaborating effectively.

The concept of being transparent and vulnerable can seem out of place in business—or, for some, too warm and fuzzy—but they are necessary attributes for attracting and retaining top talent and for positioning a business for the future. “When we talk about being vulnerable, we’re not talking about sunshine and rainbows,” Haberberger said. “It’s just about being human, and showing up, and being yourself. It’s not fluff.”



COMPETENCY NO. 4**THINK SOCIALLY—REMEMBER THE GREATER GOOD**

Many business leaders claim that people are their organization's most valuable asset. If this is true, it should mean that they have established solid reasons for why employees want to work for them and for why customers want to do business with them. In "Think Socially," leaders will examine how the activities of their departments, branches, team members, customers, and communities intersect. In doing this, program participants will work on developing leadership skills that go beyond solely focusing on financial performance in the interest of driving overall organizational health (which, ultimately, leads to better financial performance).



"Think Socially' is all about a real mind-set shift on why organizations exist," Haberberger said. "There's a lot of talk right now about the rise of the social enterprise. People today are not just looking for a paycheck; they're looking for a purpose. As an organization, if all we offer is a paycheck, we're going to miss out on a huge population of high-quality talent because they don't see the bigger purpose for their individual role or for the organization."

During the program, participants will be given a scenario for which they will be asked to analyze how a proposed change would affect their organizations at a micro level (a certain department and its immediate team, for example), as well as at a macro level (the entire organization, including all of its departments, suppliers, customers, and the community). "It is really about zooming out to that macro level and being able to see the big picture and the ways that what your organization does on a day-to-day basis impacts the entire community," Haberberger said, adding that it's necessary for today's leaders to continually perform this exercise in the interest of remaining relevant and bringing purpose to their organization. "Millennials and Gen Z in particular don't view work as a place anymore. They view work as a thing: 'It's not a place I go; it's a thing, a part of my life.' Humans today are more purpose driven, so how do we help them see that thing they do—the work—as purposeful?"

This is an important question to answer, considering that today's employees aren't happy with simply performing a task in the interest of receiving a paycheck. Instead, they are seeking out organizations that make a difference not only in their own lives, but also in their communities.

ready to fail. We need to be transparent in our communication and actions with others.

Embody: Leaders have the confidence to be vulnerable enough to admit their flaws. They are willing to surround themselves with people who are smarter than they are.

Exemplify: Leaders admit both their mistakes and successes publicly to their team and in one-on-one interactions. They let the people on their team see and know their whole selves.

■ Competency No. 4***Think Socially—Remember the Greater Good***

Embrace: Work and life are intertwined in today's world. Organizations should seek to improve not only themselves, but also the lives of their employees and customers.

Embody: Leaders value people as their organization's most important asset. They display empathy toward others by seeing things from their perspectives.

Exemplify: Leaders act in the best interests of their companies, employees, and customers. They learn about the passions and desires of each team member.

■ Competency No. 5***Never Settle—Pursue Growth***

Embrace: No matter how much talent and experience we have, there is always room for growth. If we aren't growing, we're dying.

Embody: Leaders are self-aware; they are conscious of their own strengths and weaknesses. They create visions and goals for who they want to be and for what they want to achieve.

Exemplify: Leaders constantly challenge themselves and others to do better and be better. They encourage innovation, change, and the leveraging of technology throughout the entire organization. —C.H.



The Capstone Project

Throughout the course of the NAED Leadership Development Program, participants will conduct a nine-month project that will have practical implications on their own organizations. Dubbed “The Capstone Project,” the goal is to enable leaders to apply their skills to initiate meaningful change.

“The Capstone Project will challenge individuals to take an issue—a problem or an area for growth in their organization—and then through their leadership, make business impact,” explained Elizabeth Haberberger, president of Dale Carnegie Training of St. Louis. “It’s going to be something that is either revenue generating or [related to] cost savings, but it’s going to require them to do some things differently. It’s going to require them to grow.” —C.H.

“We know from studies that companies that have the highest employee engagement are companies where the employees feel like they are contributing,” Bright said. “They want to know that what they are doing at work is contributing, and that contribution to the greater good is what provides the feeling of accomplishment and pride that makes us happy.”

COMPETENCY NO. 5

NEVER SETTLE—PURSUE GROWTH

Complacency has never equaled innovation, and in today’s business climate, it’s a sure path to failure. While it’s tempting to do things the way we’ve always done them (especially if we’ve been in the industry a long time), this isn’t the way to attract and retain high-performing employees, leverage technological advances, and remain agile in the face of increasing—and disruptive—competition.

Bright explained that “Never Settle” urges leaders to cultivate and nourish their curiosity in the interest of continual growth. “If we’re not growing, we’re dying—we’ve got to continue to grow,” she said. “It goes right along with change agility: We’ve always got to be questioning the status quo. We cannot be happy with things the way they are because if they are [always the same], we’re going to fail.”

These competencies were developed as tools for leaders to apply in an unpredictable, rapidly changing business climate. Haberberger argues that the drastic evolution in how we do business obligates leaders to grow new skills and expand their perspective.

“In our eyes, leadership has really evolved because of two main things: One, customers are changing,” she said. “We’re seeing more B2B customers starting to act like B2C customers.”

And two, Haberberger said, markets are changing as well, thanks to the disruption of traditional business models. “It’s forcing leaders to change,” she said. “Leaders have to take a different approach to business; it can’t just be doing things the way that we’ve constantly done them before. If we don’t do something different, then business is going to slowly get worse and worse. There is no way that you cannot focus on leadership and be a successful business in the next 10, 20, 30 years.” ■



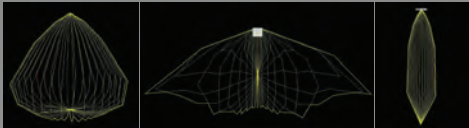
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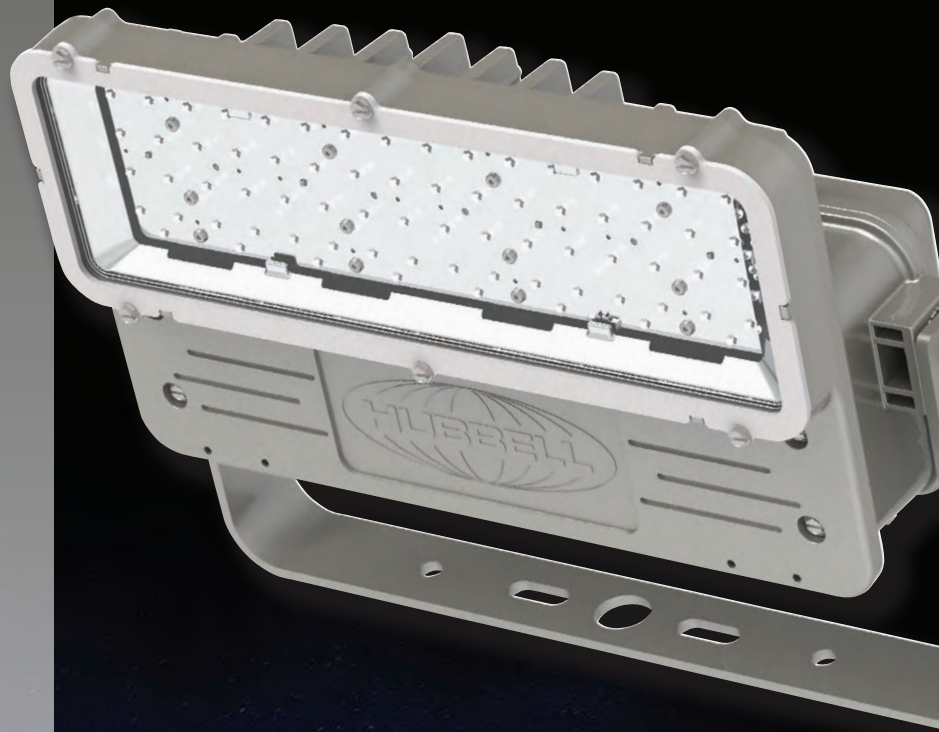


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leadership

FROM FOCUSED EDUCATION LINKED TO NAED-DEFINED LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES TO STRUCTURED ACTIVITIES THAT CONNECT LEARNING TO DAY-TO-DAY WORK AND LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES, THE NEW LEAD CONFERENCE WILL OPEN NEW DOORS FOR LEADERS AT ANY EXPERIENCE LEVEL.

by Jan Niehaus

The ever-evolving LEAD Conference now offers focused education that is linked to NAED-defined leadership competencies, plus structured activities that connect learning to conference attendees' day-to-day work lives and leadership challenges.

For a half-century, ever since 1970, NAED has hosted an annual conference designed to elevate the leadership potential and skills of

members' employees. In the beginning, it was called the "Under-40 Club." In 1972, it was renamed the "Young Executives of Today." The conference was rebranded LEAD (Leadership Enhancement and Development) in 2008, when it became obvious that young people were not the only leadership candidates in the electrical distribution industry. Despite the fact that the LEAD Conference hosts the "30 Under 35"

awards ceremony (of all the NAED conferences, LEAD really is the most logical forum for this particular awards ceremony), not all budding leaders are under 35 or 40 or 50.

Consider the sales associate who has scaled the sales ladder, moving from counter sales to sales manager, from “doer” to “leader of doers.” After moving from a sales role into management, one astute distributor employee commented, “I realized I’m not dealing with products anymore. Now I’m in the people business.” Although there are commonalities between serving customers and serving direct-report sales associates, the jobs are still quite different.

Consider, too, the industry newcomer who left an electrical contracting company to join his favorite distributor. While he may not be a 30-something, he is a candidate for leadership training, just the same as aspiring Millennials are.

And then there are the specialists, hired away from manufacturing, integration, and installation companies during economic downturns, many of them experts in their specific disciplines (e.g., automation, security, solar), but they may not be accustomed to leading departments.

Dan Knapp, director of sales, southern Wisconsin, for Milwaukee-based Standard Electric Supply, emphasized this point. He attended four 2019 LEAD conferences, so his observations are firsthand.

“There has been a definite shift in demographics,” he said. “There is a wide age range today, a wide range of experiences, both men and women, industry veterans and people who came into electrical distribution from other industries, and the full representation of different positions within an electrical distributor. The draw is nationwide, so attendees get a feel for what’s going on across the industry. That’s the beauty of this conference:

diversity. We are able to garner lots of different opinions and thoughts.”

New and Improved

In addition to changes to the conference name and in the demographic makeup of the audience, the content of the conference has also evolved, as Knapp explained: “In 2017, we introduced an optional, volunteer activity—Lead to Feed—where attendees who want to can go as a group to a food bank to help package food for later distribution to qualified recipients. It was very well received in 2017. Feedback was good, so we repeated the activity in 2018 and 2019, and we plan to always offer a volunteer activity to benefit the community that is hosting our conference.”

In 2018, NAED added a second optional activity: a 5K run/walk, which has also been well attended. It was also repeated in 2019, with plans to incorporate a 5K run/walk into the 2020 conference as well. As LEAD Committee chair, Knapp, together with employees of other NAED member companies and NAED staff, helped plan the 2018 conference. He offered this

rationale for incorporating the run: “When we were planning the conference, we noted an overwhelming consensus among leadership experts that taking care of oneself and one’s body through exercise is part of what it takes to be a leader.”

Incorporating optional, voluntary community activities was a significant enhancement to the LEAD Conference, but the biggest changes involve the curriculum and content.

David de Steiger, vice president at Raymond de Steiger, Inc., headquartered in Sterling Heights, Mich., attended his first LEAD Conference in 2014 and has returned every subsequent year. De Steiger, who serves with Knapp on the LEAD Committee, described the recent content evolution: “In 2018, we had a couple of speakers who were excellent. They were more motivational speakers. The feedback we got from 2018 attendees was that they were looking to get more meat in terms of educational content. We took this feedback into our planning meeting for the 2019 conference. At that same time, NAED was starting to develop the Leader-



ship Development Program, and the two came together.”

Indeed. The LEAD Conference is the central event of the new Leadership Development Program, occurring midway through the year-long program. Program participants will gather one day before the conference for a half-day face-to-face session, complete with a case study designed to help participants clarify their values and apply their leadership competencies to a practical problem. While the content of the Leadership Development Program will remain relatively consistent from year to year, the LEAD Conference will deliver fresh content and unique opportunities for leadership skill development every year.

Kelly Jones, NAED director of learning and program content, offered

these details: “The Learning Development Program launched in January 2020. We have maintained the LEAD Conference components that attendees tell us they value highly—the roundtable discussions and other opportunities to network and exchange ideas with their peers—but we are switching from speakers of a more motivational nature to those that focus on leadership competencies. Each year, the entire conference program will revolve around a specific theme (e.g., the 2019 theme was emotional intelligence, an important leadership skill). Every year, we will have a new theme that is related to one of the five leadership competencies that NAED has defined in its new Leadership Development Program.”

The competencies that LEAD

Conference attendees can expect to encounter are:

- ☛ **BE OKAY WITH THE GRAY:** Embrace Ambiguity
- ☛ **FROM ME TO WE:** Collaborate with Others
- ☛ **BOLDLY STEP OUT:** Be Vulnerable and Transparent
- ☛ **THINK SOCIALLY:** Remember the Greater Good
- ☛ **NEVER SETTLE:** Pursue Growth

Another significant change is the conference’s built-in mechanisms for attendees to transfer their learning back to the job. De Steiger described how this worked for the 2019 LEAD



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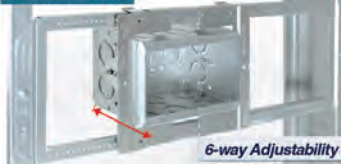
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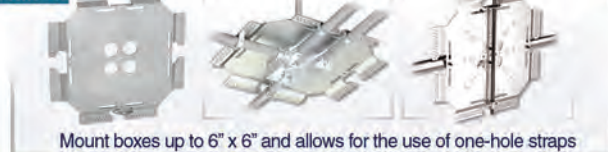
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Conference: “Everyone at the conference had completed an emotional intelligence assessment before coming to the conference. At the conference, we had a full-day workshop to decipher what our assessment results were and what they meant. Then we formed two-person teams to come up with three-month action plans to work on the areas that we needed to strengthen. The areas that most of us were struggling with were impulse control and stress tolerance. We all came out of the workshop with individual, personal action plans. We kept in touch with our coaching partner about these action plans. And we took the assessment again 90 days after the conference. My partner and I both had improved dramatically. We were surprised that we jumped up as much as we did. I talked with others at my company who also attended the 2019 conference, and they reported similar results, that they had improved in the areas they focused on.” De Steiger is still using some of the stress management techniques that he learned at the 2019 conference, such as deep breathing and regular exercise to blow off steam. “To keep from overreacting in stressful situations, I can step away and then come back later with a more calculated response,” he explained.

LEAD Conference planners intend to replicate this sort of follow-up with future conferences. De Steiger said, “It’s easy to go to a workshop and get excited about what you’re learning. But then you’re back at your job, catching up, and you never get around to really working on what you took from the conference. Ideally, we want to have some sort of pre- and post-assessment every year, if it makes sense with the year’s theme. We will definitely have some follow-up. That setup worked really well in 2019. It kept people engaged with the theme after they got back to their jobs.”

Knapp agreed: “We’ll make sure

the conference isn’t a stand-alone event. We want the conference theme to continue throughout the year.”

Keep the Winners

Two historically popular conference events will continue: the roundtable discussions, one organized by job function (e.g., sales, marketing, operations) and the other organized around a timely industry topic—“whatever might be grinding people’s gears,” de Steiger said. Every discussion group is facilitated by a member of the LEAD

paths to leadership, and related their perceptions of industry trends and challenges. These savvy industry leaders will continue to play a role at future LEAD Conferences.

And as with previous LEAD Conferences, speakers will continue to address the audience. In 2019, two speakers addressed the conference’s emotional intelligence theme. At future conferences, speakers will contribute to the year’s theme, delivering on-target, educational value. “We want the conference to provide some-

I have participated in roundtable discussions at other meetings and it’s sometimes hard to get people to speak up. That doesn’t happen at LEAD Conferences. The LEAD Conference has a unique vibe.

Committee, a LEAD Champion volunteer, or an NAED staff person to ensure that all participants get to express their opinions and ideas. LEAD Champions are attendees who are interested in serving on the LEAD Committee in the future.

These structured discussions, when coupled with the many opportunities throughout the conference for attendees to mix and mingle, have led to some lasting, invaluable outcomes. “The relationships that I’ve developed at the LEAD Conferences have truly been a benefit. I have developed some great friendships throughout the country, people I can bounce ideas off of,” said Knapp.

Executives at NAED member companies, both distribution and manufacturing, also bring their insights directly to the conference. In past years, industry executives have served on discussion panels, shared their

thing tangible that attendees can take back to their jobs and share with their coworkers,” Knapp said.

Sharing their learning with coworkers is not a difficult challenge for the typical LEAD conferee. “There’s a certain energy that attendees bring with them. I have participated in roundtable discussions at other meetings, and it’s sometimes hard to get people to speak up. That doesn’t happen at the LEAD Conferences. The LEAD Conference has a unique vibe,” de Steiger reported. In fact, it’s a unique vibe that’s grown even more engaging and invigorating with every recent enhancement. ■

Niehaus, LEED GA, is an instructional designer and writer and the president and founder of Communication by Design (communicationbydesign.net). Reach her at 314-644-4135 or Jan@CommunicationByDesign.net.

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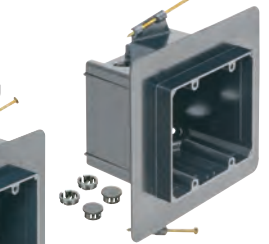
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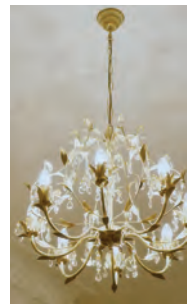
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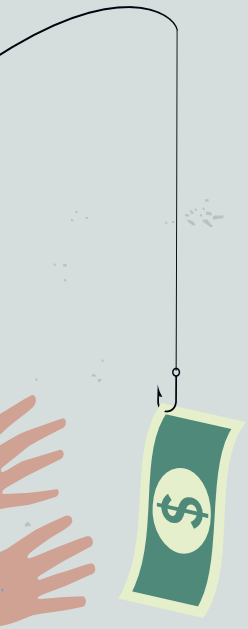
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SPECIAL
issue





CHANGING POSITIONS, TAKING ON NEW RESPONSIBILITIES, AND HAVING LEADERS THEY CAN LEARN FROM HELP KEEP A COMPANY'S MOST VALUABLE INVESTMENTS FROM JOB HOPPING.

by
Joe Nowlan

SECURE YOUR ASSETS

The U.S. labor force was essentially at full employment as 2019 concluded, and as a result, business owners are understandably concerned about how best to keep their young executives and leaders from moving to a competitor—or even another industry altogether. In such an employees' market in terms of hiring, it's a worry that many in electrical distribution are also confronting. And in another reversal of employment norms for the current generation of employees, changing jobs every two to three years is no longer necessarily the same red flag on workers' résumés as it might have been 10 years ago.

But in speaking with a sampling of these young executives, it may not be as worrisome a topic as some fear.

Neil Gartin is the inventory and demand planning manager, procurement, at Border States Electric in Brooklyn Park, Minn. He has been with the company for more than 14 years. “I couldn’t imagine changing employers every couple of years. That would just be chaos,” he said.

But Gartin is quick to point out that during the time he has been at Border States, he has been able to change positions and titles roughly every two or three years.

“I would say some of that has to do with being promoted from within,” Gartin said. “There’s a tremendous amount of opportunity to try different roles and to grow in a leadership capacity.”

It’s been among the attributes that have kept Gartin at Border States, he explained, even going back to his first years there. The ability to try those different roles has also

materials and supplies to keep people incentivized to stay.

Bethany Istok has been at K/E Electric Supply since 2000, starting her career there as a receptionist. She is currently a lighting specialist at K/E, which has four locations, all located in Michigan. “In my job, what I do every day is different,” she said. “It’s never the same. It’s not the same every day, every week.”

Istok noted that the job continues to evolve. “There are five of us doing the same job, but I oversee our department,” she said. “So with that, I get out and visit one of our different branches. I’ll visit with more customers, going into their offices and whatnot.”

Great Leadership Makes Great Leaders

Solid, respectful leadership is key at any company for many reasons—not the least of which is the fact that knowing that those who lead them are open to, and genuinely

SOLID, RESPECTFUL LEADERSHIP IS KEY TO ANY COMPANY FOR MANY REASONS—NOT THE LEAST OF WHICH IS THE FACT THAT KNOWING THAT THOSE WHO LEAD THEM ARE OPEN TO, AND GENUINELY CONSIDERING OF, NEW IDEAS AND SUGGESTIONS IS ESSENTIAL TO LONG-TERM EMPLOYMENT.

kept things from becoming stale or too repetitive.

“I think one element of staying with Border States is the ability to try different things and the flexibility to move into different roles in the organization with ease,” Gartin said.

Lara Cordell has been able to use her master’s degree in lighting in her work at Wiedenbach-Brown since 2008. She is a national account executive and director of technology, working from her home office in San Diego.

“I’m still here, things are growing and building, and I really like the company,” she said, adding that her role has evolved with less focus on her tech advisory role.

“The director of technology role was important when LEDs were first coming out and there were a lot of junk products on the market,” Cordell explained. “I was helping our sales teams investigate products for their national accounts. I would put forth recommendations on what’s good and what should be avoided and kept everyone up to date as LED standards evolved. Thankfully we’re past that tumultuous phase now and what’s on the market is generally quality LED product.”

Border States has more than 100 locations in 22 states. Wiedenbach-Brown has nine branch offices in addition to distribution centers on each coast. Yet an organization doesn’t have to have enormous resources or a backlog of

considering of, new ideas and suggestions is essential to long-term employment.

Gartin explained how he has benefited from the collective company leadership at Border States that remains open and receptive to input and ideas.

“I’ve had really good leaders and bosses the whole way through who provide the autonomy for me to grow and try new ideas to lead important projects,” he explained. “Leadership at Border States doesn’t feel hierarchical and I really appreciate that.”

It makes for an unintimidating atmosphere where Gartin can feel free to suggest ideas or modifications, he explained. “I can be pretty open and honest with my boss without any sort of concern about how I’m going to be received,” Gartin said. “I can be pretty open with the next level up in the organization.”

Company ownership that is receptive to ideas or even criticism—preferably constructive—is a quality that will often benefit both corporate leadership and coworkers at any company. Cordell explained how this has been among the reasons she has stayed at Wiedenbach-Brown.

“My general approach is to think about what I would do if this were my own company; I make a lot of suggestions for operational improvement and I’m often tasked

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with carrying out those changes,” Cordell said. “Creating standards may be more work up front, and technically not in my job title, but in the end, it makes my life easier so I can focus on growing sales, and it makes the company better overall. If you have a company that embraces feedback and isn’t threatened by it, then it creates an environment of mutual respect, and it’s a place worth staying for the long term.”

Knowing their company values the latest in training and product development is always valued by employees, of course. For Istok, working in lighting with its myriad inno-



ventions makes this even more essential. “K/E is very big on continuing education. Every year we look at what learning opportunities are out there and whether it’s something we’ll need,” she explained. “We’ll go out of state to a manufacturer for training. They’re always looking to improve every employee.”

There are various other tangible and intangible benefits that an electrical distributor can offer that keep employees from moving to a competitor. One that many are offering in recent years is the opportunity to work remotely.

Gartin has been involved in hiring at Border States, noting that the company has been hiring new people more aggressively in the past few years. “I’ve been hiring people

since 2014 and it does seem to be a job seekers’ market right now,” he said. “It is a challenge to find the right talents and the right culture fit at the same time.”

Offering an employee the chance to work remotely from home, even one or two days a week, can help—and not just by making their weekly commute a bit easier.

In addition, few things can be more disappointing to a company than finding talented potential hires who are interested in accepting an offer but also admit they do not want to relocate. “Oftentimes you’re limited to the geography and where your offices are located,” Gartin said. “It’s often tough to get people to relocate.”

Such a hiring challenge is, in some ways, a nice thing to have because much of it is driven by the uptick in overall business at Border States, he explained.

“The past few years have been really interesting and challenging, with a lot of growth and a lot of new projects to pioneer,” Gartin said. “That’s exciting and invigorating.”

Still, Gartin admits that finding talented hires—and then developing them to the point of promoting them to supervisory positions—can be difficult. It’s a dilemma that many in electrical distribution are experiencing these days.

“We’re growing so fast that the typical length of time that someone works as an individual contributor before moving into supervision has really shortened,” he explained. “However, I don’t think we suffer because of this. We wouldn’t promote if we didn’t think they were ready for the challenge and we also benefit from their new ideas.”

For all the analysis here about employee motivations, working remotely, and related job benefits, occasionally it is the smaller things—something a large company might not even think of—that also mean a lot, as Istok explained. “K/E Supply is a good, small family firm to work for,” she said. “They bring in Santa at Christmas, and we have a company picnic every year—that makes a difference.”

Gartin, Cordell, and Istok have occasionally been approached about moving to other companies. In most cases, salary and benefits are all well and good but other, somewhat intangible, features can win the day.

For Cordell, it’s having a strong team to work with, people who care about the work as much as she does and who share the same goals. “I [have] a team of people who are really good at what they do, and we’ve worked together for years,” she explained. “I think much of employee retention is about working around people you like and creating a culture that we all want to continue to work in. I can’t imagine moving to another company because I wouldn’t have my team around me.” ■

Nowlan is a Boston-based freelance writer/editor and author. He can be reached at jcnolan@msn.com.

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**WHEN IT COMES TO
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KNOWLEDGE AND
CULTIVATING SELLING
SKILLS, EPEC IS THE
CORNERSTONE OF SALES
AND PRODUCT TRAINING
IN THE INDUSTRY.
A THIRD, BUT LESSER-
KNOWN OUTCOME:
THE DEVELOPMENT OF
LEADERSHIP SKILLS.**

by Jan Niehaus

An EPEC Impact

NAED's Electrical Products Education Course (EPEC) is lauded by many electrical distributors as the single most valuable training program in the industry today. "I am certain that EPEC is at least partially responsible for our success," said Rock Kuchenmeister, general manager at K/E Electric Supply, based in Mt. Clemens, Mich. "Of the 75 employees in our company, one-third

have completed EPEC Bronze. We have two EPEC Silver graduates, and 10 have completed EPEC Gold," he reported.

Compared by some industry leaders to a college-level course, EPEC focuses first and foremost on electrical products and secondly on selling skills. A third area of skill development—leadership—is rarely promoted, although it is often reported by graduates and their direct supervisors, managers, and corporate executives.

According to Debbie Lakamp, director of talent management for St. Louis-based Graybar, “EPEC training helps develop leadership skills. I see the impact of EPEC in our salespeople.” EPEC is a component of Graybar’s development program for its sales professionals: first, they go through local orientation and onboarding; then they take the Accelerated Sales Development program at corporate headquarters; and then they head back to their branches, which is when EPEC is typically offered.

As intended, EPEC is directly responsible for increased sales by the program’s graduates. “We have seen a direct connection between EPEC, the number of lines per order, and the number of orders. We’ve also tracked dollars per order, and they go up too. Our EPEC graduates are selling more items, selling higher-priced items, and making more sales in a day,” Kuchenmeister reported.

EPEC’s status as the premier vehicle for developing knowledge of electrical products and selling skill is undisputed, but where do leadership skills come into play?

It Starts with Confidence

It starts with the confidence born of knowing that you know what you’re talking about.

Lakamp explained the connection: “When a customer calls with an immediate question, if you’ve been through EPEC, you have a much stronger understanding of what the customer is asking, what stage of the project they are in, and why they are probably asking the question. Your confidence enables you to be consultative and solve problems together with your customer. You know that your suggestions are good ones and on point. You have confidence that you’re adding value.”

Lakamp contends that confidence is an essential quality of leaders. “Ef-

fective leaders tend to be very confident and competent. They have a sense of confidence about what they’re doing. They know how their behaviors lead to success,” she said.

Pete Schneider, the North Bay regional manager for Independent Electric Supply (IES), headquartered in San Leandro, Calif., described how Inside Salesperson Adam Musgrove’s advanced product knowledge paved a path for him into an informal leadership role—and a formal promotion:

“Since completing EPEC, Musgrove has established himself as someone with a broad base of product knowledge,” he explained. “People come to him with their product questions, and he helps bring them along. When he completed EPEC, he was working at the counter. About a year ago, he moved into an inside sales role. Even though he is not at the counter anymore, the people he helped train before he went inside still bring him their product questions.”

Roy Thornton, vice president of sales and the Bay Area regional manager for IES—who has been sending his people through EPEC since the late 1980s—sees the same voluntary coaching and mentoring in his region. “It’s amazing to see people who’ve gone through EPEC teaching and coaching others; they have really embraced the role of helping their coworkers,” Thornton explained. “I have seen inside salespeople, EPEC graduates, latch onto a counter salesperson or a warehouse person. I don’t usually hear the conversation, but the warehouse guy will tell me that Joe, the EPEC grad, asked him, ‘What are you working on?’ and then Joe explained what product to use ‘and here are the reasons why.’ Later I tell Joe, ‘Great job. You’re mentoring your coworker.’ Most of them don’t know that they’re coaching and mentoring, but they are. You have to point it out to them. They are becoming leaders.”



According to Chad Budnick, branch manager with K/E and an EPEC Gold graduate, K/E’s EPEC graduates are also actively, voluntarily coaching and mentoring their coworkers. “‘See one, do one, teach one.’ I have lived by this motto forever,” he said. “This is what our EPEC graduates are doing. The chain continues, one person to another. EPEC grads understand the relationships between products that might not seem to go together, and they are willing to step in and help a coworker who doesn’t understand: ‘Here, this is what you need.’ EPEC grads take the time to explain how and why the different products go together. This doesn’t happen with non-EPEC people.”

It Encourages Commitment

Every level and course within the EPEC curriculum—Bronze, Silver, Gold, Lighting, Automation, and Datacom & Video—is a major undertaking. NAED recommends allowing



nine months to complete Bronze, six months for Silver, and four months for Gold. IES encourages its employees to complete a course in nine months and provides a financial reward to those who do.

Thornton sees commitment as a crucial leadership quality and the fuel that carries trainees through the demanding EPEC program. “In our business, we give our associates opportunities to go through programs like EPEC, and some people raise their hands, but the hit rate isn’t 100%. If they are not fully committed, they won’t finish, and when these individuals get to a point in their careers, they tend to stall out. EPEC is a huge commitment. When people get engaged and finish, that shows commitment—and that is one of the main leadership traits,” he said, noting that while IES allows employees two or three hours a week of company time to train, “We also expect them to make the sacrifice and give some of their own time too.”

“It takes discipline and determina-

tion to complete EPEC. EPEC is a big project. After finishing EPEC, grads are more comfortable taking on responsibility for more and bigger projects,” Kuchenmeister explained.

Kuchenmeister added that he views EPEC as the foundation for later leadership courses. “We routinely send people to various NAED, UID, and IMARK seminars as they become available. The EPEC grads who go to these leadership seminars tend to get more out of them than the people who haven’t been through EPEC,” he said. Turnover among EPEC graduates is lower too, which Kuchenmeister believes is due in part to their appreciation for the investment that the company is making in them and their career development.

Budnick has registered for the inaugural year (2020) of NAED’s new Leadership Development Program. “Chad saw it and came to me,” noted Kuchenmeister. “He was looking for something to do to grow more as a professional. I was looking to sign someone up for this new program, and he was on my short list, so I said yes.” Budnick, an EPEC Gold graduate, manages K/E’s largest branch and the company’s largest warehouse.

It Supports Relationship Building

Taking the risk to ask for what you want is yet another demonstration of leadership skill. EPEC gives trainees practice doing just that. They are required to study blueprints and specifications for hypothetical but realistic projects and then identify all the products needed for the projects. To complete these assignments, trainees often turn to their more senior colleagues or specialists inside their companies for guidance.

“Musgrove needed to reach out to others when he was going through EPEC,” Schneider said. “His talking with the more senior employees helped him build stronger working

relationships with those individuals.”

The relationship building that EPEC fosters is invaluable—for aspiring trainees and also for the senior associates and managers whose expertise is sought. K/E’s Saturday morning EPEC classes, led by none other than Rock Kuchenmeister himself, provide similar networking and team-building value. Trainees’ work with Kuchenmeister demonstrates the ease of interacting with top K/E executives, and trainees learn to count on one another for support as they learn. “We are very team oriented here at K/E. We all talk about ‘Team K/E,’” Budnick said. The ties forged through EPEC are lasting, establishing reliable go-to resources for current and future issues and facilitating the transitions that accompany EPEC graduates’ inevitable promotions.

The whole EPEC learning experience cultivates leadership and informs culture in yet another subtle way: Trainees are given permission—even required—to ask questions, which is an obvious admission that they don’t have all the answers. Also, this practice of asking questions is foundational to innovation, creativity, and process improvement. By modeling this behavior, EPEC students and graduates help to create an authentic and transparent culture.

“We always need to be asking questions. We stress this in our leadership development program. To be consultative—to help bring value—involves asking questions. That is a lot of what we teach. When you have more confidence, which EPEC builds, it makes it so much easier for you to ask questions—the right questions,” Lakamp said. ■

Niehaus, LEED GA, is an instructional designer and writer and the president and founder of Communication by Design (communicationbydesign.net). Reach her at 314-644-4135.



Congratulations to the 2019 EPEC Graduates

NAED's Electrical Products Education Course (EPEC) is recognized as a symbol of quality and a gauge of professional competency in the electrical industry. EPEC integrates the full range of products distributors sell with a unique systems approach—providing information about individual products and applications as well as showing how each is interrelated with other products in electrical systems. Congratulations to the following individuals on their 2019 accomplishments. (Note: This list does not include all of the graduates, including 238 from CED.) Learn more about EPEC at naed.org/BeEPEC or contact NAED Member Engagement at memberengagement@naed.org or 888-791-2512.

EPEC GOLD

Akin, Kayla, Border States Electric, Nashville, Tenn.

Akridge, Hilary, Graybar, St. Louis

Ashmore, Amy, Springfield Electric Supply, Davenport, Iowa

Bettis, Cecil, Interstate Electric Supply, Ontario, Ore.

Beyerlin, Justin, North Coast Electric—A Sonepar Company, Anchorage, Alaska

Boyles, Theresa, Mayer, Nashville, Tenn.

Brimer, John, Graybar, Kansas City, Mo.

Brugger, Kraig, Border States Electric, Florence, S.C.

Budnick, Chad, K/E Electric Supply, Mount Clemens, Mich.

Camargo, Adrian, Mid-Coast Electric Supply, San Antonio

Cheatham, Michael, Springfield Electric Supply, Rockford, Ill.

Dennis, Brandon, North Coast Electric—A Sonepar Company, Eugene, Ore.

Donohue, Brian, North Coast Electric—A Sonepar Company, Longview, Wash.

Hajek, Colton, Border States Electric, Greeley, Colo.

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Knopp, Tyler, Crescent Electric Supply, Dubuque, Iowa

Koelz, Brandon, Springfield Electric Supply, Mount Vernon, Ill.

Kohl, Jordan, Crescent Electric Supply, Dubuque, Iowa

Monroe, Russell, Medler Electric, Big Rapids, Mich.

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Pupa, Jessica, Border States Electric, Charlotte, N.C.

Rowley, Josh, Blazer Electric Supply, Colorado Springs, Colo.

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Wright, Samantha, Summit Electric Supply, Irving, Texas

Zirnhelt, Matthew, Dakota Supply Group, Grand Forks, N.D.

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Bell, Quentin, Elliott Electric Supply, San Antonio

Biondi, Jake, Rumsey Electric, Conshohocken, Pa.

Bosque, Rudy, Dakota Supply Group, Minot, N.D.

Broadfoot, David, Revere Electric Supply, Madison, Wis.

Clough, Cathy, Graybar, St. Louis

Donohue, Brian, North Coast Electric—A

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Everly, Barbara, Viking Electric—A Sonepar Company, Madison, Wis.

Fletcher, Stacey, Kirby Risk Electrical Supply, Decatur, Ill.

Gum, Justin, United Electric Supply, Bethlehem, Pa.

Haensly, Brandon, Graybar, Buffalo, N.Y.

Hajek, Colton, Border States Electric, Greeley, Colo.

Hillebrenner, Joe, Springfield Electric

Supply, Quincy, Ill.

Hodges, Brody, Mayer, Norcross, Ga.

Hook, Kyle, Crescent Electric Supply, Appleton, Wis.

Jennings, Austin, John Moore & Associates, La Vergne, Tenn.

Johnson, Tyler, North Coast Electric—A Sonepar Company, Portland, Ore.

Johnston, Samantha, Summit Electric Supply, Albuquerque, N.M.

Kohl, Jordan, Crescent Electric Supply, Dubuque, Iowa

Kohtz, Jason, Crescent Electric Supply, Grand Island, Neb.

Kopet, Devon, Border States Electric, Albertville, Minn.

Kress, Charles, Blazer Electric Supply, Colorado Springs, Colo.

Marks, Kenneth, Summit Electric Supply, Clute, Texas

McMullen, Patsy, Graybar, Oklahoma City

Merk, Jacob, Graybar, West Allis, Wis.

Mullen, Aaron, Viking Electric—A Sonepar Company, Madison, Wis.

Pavlovich, Joseph, Crescent Electric Supply, Appleton, Wis.

Pupa, Jessica, Border States Electric, Charlotte, N.C.

Reed, Jason, Graybar, Lexington, Ky.

Ross, Loren, Springfield Electric Supply, Peru, Ill.

Rowley, Josh, Blazer Electric Supply, Colorado Springs, Colo.

Stephens, Eric, Mayer, Huntsville, Ala.

Tucker, Ben, The Reynolds Company, Abilene, Texas

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Anderson, Megan, Crescent Electric Supply, Ontario, Ore.

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Anziano, Michael, Graybar, Pompano Beach, Fla.

Asmus, Andrew, Crescent Electric Supply, Madison, Wis.

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Avagnano, Frank, Graybar, Teterboro, N.J.

Baldwin, Brett, Mayer, Norcross, Ga.

Batchelor, Robert, Graybar, Richmond, Va.

Baxter, Jonathan, Stanion Wholesale Electric, Wichita, Kan.

Becher, John, Graybar, Tampa, Fla.

Biondi, Jake, Rumsey Electric, Conshohocken, Pa.

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Birt, Ashlie, Graybar, Clearwater, Fla.

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Blazer, Michael, Graybar, Nashville, Tenn.

Bradford, David, Graybar, Portland, Ore.

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Brewer, Matthew, Blazer Electric Supply, Pueblo, Colo.

Brewer, Ryan, USESI/Yale Electric Supply, Newark, Del.

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Buchanan, Ian, Elliott Electric Supply, Conway, Ark.

Bultman, Katie, Graybar, Fargo, N.D.

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Carr, Mikaela, Eoff Electric Supply—A Sonepar Company, Vancouver, Wash.

Caspar, Nick, Graybar, Gainesville, Fla.

Casper, John, Werner Electric Supply, Appleton, Wis.

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Cousino, Brandon, Graybar, Toledo, Ohio

Davis, Luke, Mayer, Atlanta

Dawson, Steven, Elliott Electric Supply, Phoenix

De Juliis, Michael, USESI/Yale Electric Supply, Newark, Del.

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Gonzalez, Jesus, Rexel USA, Denver

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Gray, Eddy, Graybar, Bristol, Tenn.

Grina, Justin, Graybar, Minot, N.D.

Guzman, Stephanie, Graybar, Houston

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Haggard, William, Mayer, Norcross, Ga.

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Harter, Aaron, Graybar, Fort Wayne, Ind.

Hartz, Allan, Graybar, Houston

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Hernandez, Kevin, Summit Electric Supply, Irving, Texas

Hodges, Brody, Mayer, Norcross, Ga.

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Hudson, Kimberly, Springfield Electric Supply, Hannibal, Mo.

Hunt, Elisabeth, Graybar, Wallingford, Conn.

Hussein, Adam, Graybar, Houston

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Johnson, Casey, Winsupply, Edina, Minn.

Johnson, Tyler, North Coast Electric—A Sonepar Company, Portland, Ore.

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Llomas, Fred, Graybar, Diamond Bar, Calif.

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Mahowald, Timothy, Viking Electric—A Sonepar Company, Minneapolis

Mann, Jacob, Independent Electric Supply—A Sonepar Company, Sacramento, Calif.

Marrugo, Yesid, Graybar, Houston

Martilli, Colby, Mayer, Norcross, Ga.

Martin, Jacob, Graybar, Orlando, Fla.

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McGough, Michael, Graybar, Lima, Ohio

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McRae, Gage, Mayer, Norcross, Ga.

Meidinger, John, Graybar, Fargo, N.D.

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Olmos, Ruben, Graybar, Diamond Bar, Calif.

Orange, Timothy, Graybar, Diamond Bar, Calif.

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Papsis, Anthony, Graybar, Portland, Maine

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Patel, Akash, Graybar, Edison, N.J.

Patterson, Rod, Graybar, Des Moines, Iowa

Paulsen, Eric, Graybar, Billings, Mont.

Phillips, Malia, Graybar, Orlando, Fla.

Piper, Dennis, Graybar, Rutland, Vt.

Podobnik, Steven, Graybar, Pittsburgh

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Rennaker, Naomi, Graybar, South Bend, Ind.

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Rivera, Efrain, USESI/Yale Electric Supply, Lancaster, Pa.

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Robinson, Ka'Nard, Graybar, Orlando, Fla.

Rodden, Ashley, Graybar, St. Louis

Rogers, Blain, Elliott Electric Supply, Houston

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Rowe, Christina, Border States

Electric, Brooklyn Park, Minn.

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Sawyer, Scott, Graybar, Williston, Vt.

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Schwemmer, Michael, Shepherd Electric Supply, Laurel, Md.

Scott, William, Medler Electric, Lansing, Mich.

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Segovia, Tyler, Graybar, Diamond Bar, Calif.

Sell, Jerry, Werner Electric Supply, Appleton, Wis.

Shaffer, Justin, Blazer Electric Supply, Pueblo, Colo.

Shanklin, William, United Electric Supply, New Castle, Del.

Shanley, Andrew, Raymond de Steiger, Inc., Sterling Heights, Mich.

Sheldon, Carrie, Graybar, St. Louis

Shertzer, Douglas, United Electric Supply, Lancaster, Pa.

Short, Brandon, Springfield Electric Supply, Springfield, Ill.

Shover, Richard, Graybar, Columbus, Ohio

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Taylor, Nolan, Graybar, Columbus, Ohio

Thompson, Michael, Graybar, Naperville, Ill.

Thompson, William, Crawford—A Sonepar Company, Houston

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Tobin, Travis, North Coast Electric—A Sonepar Company, Bellevue, Wash.

Tollefson, Karon, Border States Electric, Brooklyn Park, Minn.

Touch, Chanthou, North Coast Electric—A Sonepar Company, Wenatchee, Wash.

Turgeon, Drew, Graybar, Lakeland, Fla.

Turner, Stephen, Blazer Electric Supply, Colorado Springs, Colo.

Vigus, Shane, Graybar, Billings, Mont.

Wagner, John, Graybar, Norcross, Ga.

Walston, Chris, Springfield Electric Supply, Springfield, Ill.

Watts, Albert, Graybar, Diamond Bar, Calif.

Weber, Jordan, Crescent Electric Supply, Dubuque, Iowa

Wells, Quinlan, Graybar, Davenport, Iowa

Whittenburg, Dustin, Elliott Electric Supply, Phoenix

Wilder, Geneva, Graybar, Lexington, Ky.

Wilkins, Jared, Graybar, Lexington, Ky.

Williams, Brice, Viking Electric—A Sonepar Company, Burnsville, Minn.

Williams, Matthew, Revere Electric Supply, Madison, Wis.

Wisner, Noah, Kendall Electric, Portage, Mich.

Witt, Brandon, United Electric Supply, New Castle, Del.

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Yager, Tara, Border States Electric, Kansas City, Mo.

Yohnke, Jack, Viking Electric—A Sonepar Company, Minneapolis

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Graybar, West Allis,
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Bilderback, Jessica,
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Fague, Joe, Graybar,
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Frisk, Jeff, Standard
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Milwaukee

Fuller, Jonathan,
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West Columbia, S.C.

Graham, Aaron, Rexel
USA, San Diego

Grainger, Chris,
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Hendrick, Chris,
Qubeworx,
Jeffersonville, Ind.

Johnson, Alex,
Graybar, West Allis,
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Keihn, Keil, Graybar,
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Kent, Bruce, Barr-
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Kiehl, Tanya,
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Supply, Machesney
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Lile, Greg, Graybar,
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Loibl, Alan, Elliott
Electric Supply,
Manor, Texas

Lowrance, James,
Crescent Electric
Supply, Everett,
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McConoughey, Mylon,
Square D By
Schneider Electric,
Willowick, Ohio

Nelson, Pam, Barr-
Thorp Electric,
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O'Connell, Michael,
Viking Electric—A
Sonepar Company,
Green Bay, Wis.

Pearson, Angel,
Electrical Equipment,
Richmond, Va.

Pontious, Jeffrey,
North Coast Electric—
A Sonepar Company,
Longview, Wash.

Radice, Luke,
Standard Electric
Supply, Roselle, Ill.

Runge, Paul,
Stoneway Electric
Supply, Kent, Wash.

Sobat, Adam, Kirby
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Graybar, Glendale
Heights, Ill.

Fisher, Craig,
Graybar, Indianapolis

Flees, Patrick, Viking
Electric—A Sonepar
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Kadlec, Alexander,
Graybar, Columbus,
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Klein, Michael,
Graybar, Diamond
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**Lamontagne,
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McManigal, Tim,
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Okrzesik, Susan,
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Page, Joshua, Central
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Reed, Jason, Graybar,
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Graybar, Glendale
Heights, Ill.

Stundon, Joseph,
Graybar, Toledo, Ohio

Sudduth, Scott,
Graybar, Glendale
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Teterboro, N.J.

Tabar, Julie, Graybar,
Cincinnati

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Graybar, Naperville, Ill.

Vershay, Richard,
Graybar, Indianapolis

Wright, Samantha,
Summit Electric
Supply, Irving, Texas

EPEC VDV

Boots, Garrett,
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Bruno, Joseph,
Graybar, Teterboro,
N.J.

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Carelli, Thomas,
Graybar, Teterboro,
N.J.

Deemer, Dana,
Graybar, Indianapolis

Fox, Timothy,
Graybar, Pittsburgh

Holder, Brooke,
Graybar, Indianapolis

Moser, Tyler,
Graybar, Pittsburgh

Sinco, Ben, Graybar,
Tallahassee, Fla.

Walters, Adam,
Standard Electric
Company, Saginaw,
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Blauch, Kristina,
Graybar, Harrisburg,
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Doan, Kevin, Graybar,
Buffalo, N.Y.

Elmahdy, Nadia,
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Froese, Michael,
Graybar, Sarasota,
Fla.

Pilarski, Matthew,
Graybar, Rochester,
N.Y.

Till, Brennen,
Graybar, Phoenix

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Graybar, Teterboro,
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SPECIAL
issue



UNLOCK THE VALUE OF OLDER
WORKERS THROUGH CONTINUED INDUSTRY
TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT.

TRAINING *for the* AGES

by Joe Sullivan

The aging workforce may just now be approaching peak value to employers, as advances in medicine and lifestyle have extended productive lives. More and more companies are recognizing the value and potential value of their older workers and enhancing it through training.

A strong voice from outside the industry belongs to 92-year-old Helen Harkness. She has made a career and a national reputation out of career guidance. Thousands have turned to Harkness and her many books to learn how to boost, improve, or change their careers late in life through training.

Harkness believes that value/productivity and training are intertwined more intricately than would appear at first glance. She has seen repeatedly that without growth and challenge, people develop what she calls “career unrest.” That can sap morale, which is a shame because, as she said bluntly, “A focus on chronological age is crap. The focus should be on functional age.”

From a more positive point of view, in an article published by the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, Peter Cappelli at the Wharton Center for Human Resources stated that older workers “frequently outdo their younger colleagues...have less absenteeism, less turnover, and superior interpersonal skills and deal better with customers.” That’s a strong argument for fighting career unrest and complacency. In short, if you train them and retain them, they’re going to be solid assets.

A good example from inside electrical distribution is Mike Place, safety and compliance officer, Dakota Supply Group, Bismarck, N.D. Although at age 44 he is just approaching “older worker” status, he has overseen the training and continuing education of many older workers.

When it comes to continuing education for those who have been in the industry for 20, 30, or more years, Place is a believer. He notes, however, that there are differences in the way the older cohort must be trained for best effect.

“Younger people tend to be more familiar with emergent technologies, so it may be easier for them to accept newer, cutting-edge training mediums and delivery styles,” Place explained. “For older generations, the eternal and ever-accelerating speed of technological advancement may cause unease and worry. I would caution employers to be sensitive about the risks of leaving employees behind in pursuit of the latest and greatest training solutions.

“As a general rule, each generation of learners tends to show preference for the technologies they know and have become familiar with,” he continued. “From that perspective, it shouldn’t be surprising that older generations place significantly more value on face-to-face learning than younger ones. Because they grew up in a face-to-face world, they have more experience at reading people. Consequently, they appreciate the ability to ask questions and to handle and hold things.

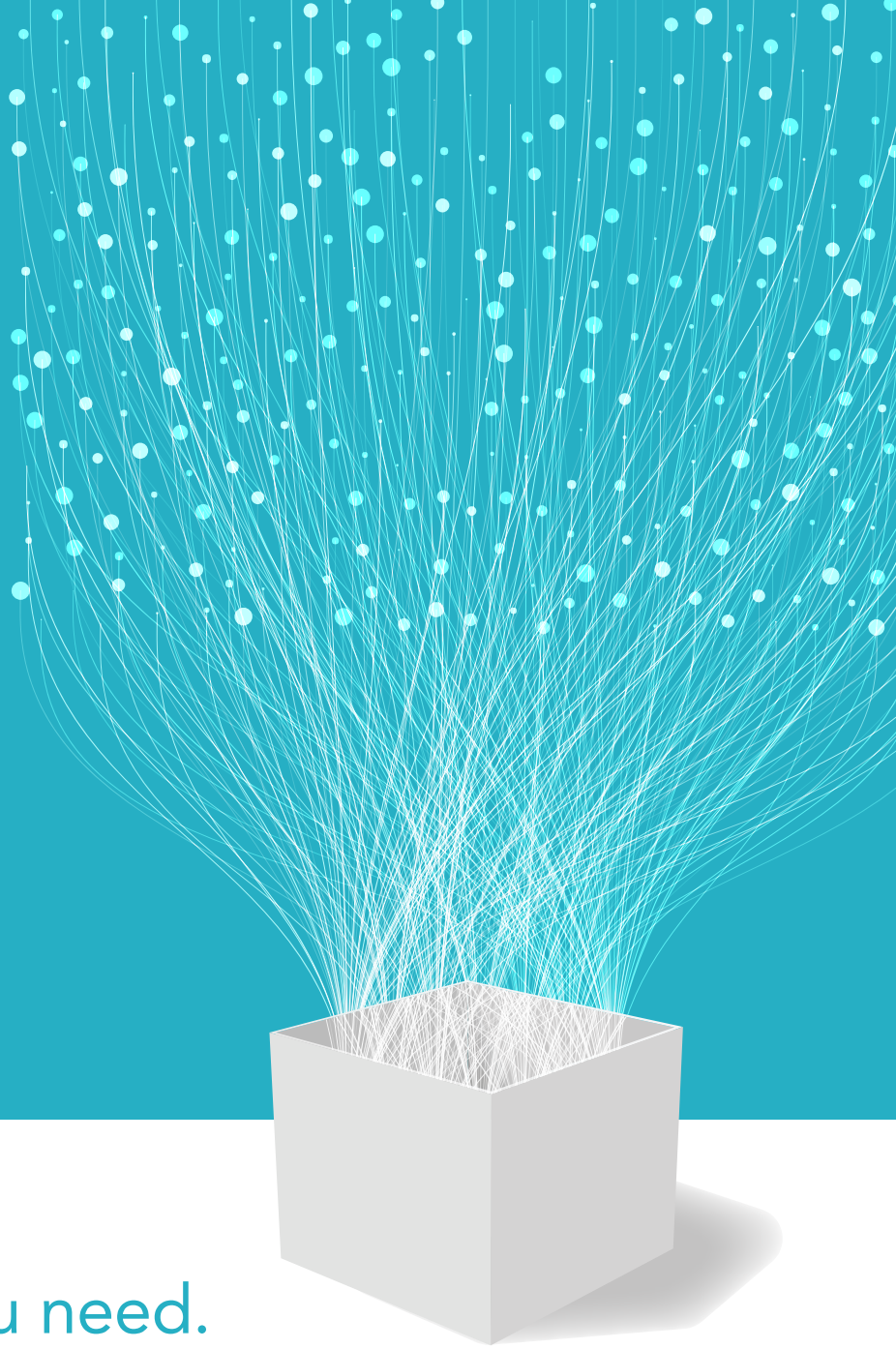
“When considering the correlation between age and the willingness to embrace new learning technologies and mediums, there seems to be a smooth, continuous curve year to year,” he added. “In short, the older the learner, the



higher the likelihood of him or her embracing legacy technologies as opposed to emerging ones.”

A 2015 paper by Matteo Picchio of Marche Polytechnic University, Italy, and IZA, Germany, *Is Training Effective for Older Workers?*, also finds age-related differences. Out of several pages of research, Picchio states that his “main message” is that “There are some concerns about the effectiveness of training in improving older workers’ employment prospects. Because of the inevitable decline in cognitive skills that accompanies aging, older adults take longer to acquire new skills and their training performance is worse than that of younger adults. Policies aimed at retaining older workers need to define training programs to meet the specific learning needs of older workers. Shown to be effective are learning activities that are self-paced, job related, and work integrated.”

An intriguing question raised in the work of Harkness, but not addressed in Picchio’s overall very sophisticated analysis, is whether complacency, lack of training, and job unrest magnify whatever cognitive declines that may exist or possibly even accelerate their onset. After all, there are many scientists and professionals who readily process new information and perform at high levels far past today’s accepted retirement age. Is it possible that motivated mental exercise extends cognitive performance just as physical exercise does with the performance of the body? Wouldn’t it be a shame and a waste if older workers were leaving employment with unknown and untapped potential simply because they got bored and stale? A growing body of work suggests that this is often so.



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However, as many employers have sadly noted, there does not seem to be any way to force employees to invest in themselves and complete their training courses. Training may help older workers break out of “job unrest” and staleness, but first they must make the effort to be trained.

In Place’s experience, one answer is to bring them into the planning. “If you allow older workers to be a part of choosing what they learn, then the more likely it will be that they are successful. The worker really needs to have a part in the decision,” he said. “Otherwise, the process can be perceived as authoritarian and runs the risk of not being well accepted. Help them to understand the benefits of the available training. That will build eagerness, retention, and motivation to learn.”

The Risk of Misinformation

Suitable training materials can be found across the electrical distribution industry. And yet, in today’s web-enabled world, people of all ages slide into the temptation of looking things up quickly on the Internet. But there is a growing risk there. In early electronic communications, a situation where people could barely be understood over the static and crackle was said to have a “high noise-to-signal ratio.”

Something like that exists online today. An answer for almost anything can usually be found, sometimes along with several thousand other answers. Which one is best? Which are even close to being correct? Which is simply false? Without prior knowledge, who can say?

Clearly, distributors must seek ways to reduce the noise and boost the signal in their training methods. This means discouraging freelance web surfing for information, even if on the surface it seems cheap and effective.

Place understands the challenge, although in another boost to older workers, he said, “The younger generations have much greater exposure to processing risk because of the likelihood in finding misinformation. The unguided use of things like YouTube is risky,” unless, of course, a known reliable source is using YouTube as a delivery mechanism. “The question,” he said, “is whether the information has been vetted.”

Information from manufacturers is generally reliable and very good at teaching features and benefits. However, it is not designed to help in the overall sales process, including related items. In fact, it is not sales training at all.

Because of this, and because even the best widely avail-

able training packages must be somewhat generic, many distributors use extensive in-house programs. One prominent distribution executive has developed a clever technique of probing to learn a topic area that makes an employee nervous. Then that employee is assigned to master the topic sufficiently to train others. When the day of training comes, presentational skills don’t matter. The point is that when they come back ready to stand in front of a group of their peers, they really know that formerly weak topic area very well indeed. Mentors are also helpful in the

process—another area where older workers do very well and will stretch and grow themselves while helping others.

An additional older-worker-intensive method is the traveling internal training team: Made up of four or five senior employees who are not only known to be highly competent, but also undergoing ongoing training in both products and internal company systems and policies, the team

visits branches for a day or two, going over all aspects of sales and operations. The idea is that anything they find that is subpar is either remedied on the spot or referred for training. Branch managers are assured that there will be no adverse consequences for anything that is not dishonest or illegal. Before leaving, the team makes a full oral report to the branch manager before saying anything at all to anyone else in the chain of command.

Teams like this, as well as mentorships, provide fun, fulfillment, and challenge to older workers sufficient to head off complacency and career unrest and replace them with enthusiasm. It can inspire intense motivation to receive further training. It also capitalizes on certain older-worker characteristics identified by Place: “It’s not unusual for older workers to have more professional and life experiences than younger workers. Because of this, they may be able to provide a more complete understanding of how their role impacts other positions in the company and how their responsibilities interface with the processes, protocols, and procedures adopted by the business.”

Dr. Harkness has found that the “normal retirement age of 55 or 65 is a great time to start a new career.” There is no good reason that career shift should not be started inside of and to the benefit of the current employer. ■

Training may help older workers break out of “job unrest” and staleness, but first they must make the effort to be trained.

Sullivan helps electrical distributors across the country work successfully through tough situations. He can be reached at 972-463-1125 or joe@joseph-sullivan.com.

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D I F F E R E N C E

DEVELOPING MORE DIVERSE LEADERSHIP IS KEY TO BETTER IDEAS, IMPROVED CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIPS, AND GREATER OVERALL COMPETITIVENESS.

by Carol Katarisky

We've come a long way in increasing diversity in industry leadership—especially female leadership. But there's more to do—and it's not for lack of effort. Electrical distribution faces a catch-22: It's harder to recruit from diverse groups when your workforce isn't already diverse. Overcoming that hurdle will take concerted efforts by individuals, companies, and industry-wide programs. And while that sounds like a lot of work, it's important work. Why? Because diversity in leadership isn't only the right thing to do—it's critical to a company's ability to be nimble in an increasingly complex and competitive marketplace.

“It’s not a question of why; it’s why not?” said Emily Schaffer, HR manager, Schaedler Yesco Distribution, Harrisburg, Pa. “It’s just the way the world is. We’re a mishmash of people from different backgrounds. It’s common sense. You’re missing out on great thoughts and perspectives if you don’t have people with different perspectives.”

“Leadership needs to reflect diversity in the employee base of a company. And a diverse employee base needs to reflect diversity in the community,” said Jayne Millard, chairman and co-CEO, Turtle & Hughes, Linden, N.J. “Until you have that fluid engagement across all types of people, you’re not going to be as close to the market as you could be.”

In addition to having leaders who understand and represent different aspects of potential customers, diversity in leadership improves the quality of the ideas management can access. “It’s so easy to get into groupthink and think you’re on the right path in building relationships, your go-to-market strategy, etc., until you bring in different perspectives and backgrounds,” said Lura McBride, president, CEO, and an employee-owner, Van Meter, Cedar Rapids, Iowa. “Research shows that more diverse thinking brings about better results. If you want to build the best business and the best industry, this must be an area of strategic focus.”

Where We Are Now

There’s no question that the industry has made strides to improve diversity. Women lead several major companies and more women than ever before fill company ranks. But there is still room to improve.

“I wouldn’t give it an outstanding grade, but I see that there is an intent and focus on mentoring diverse candidates. There is engagement at the top and calls to action, especially from our

manufacturing partners,” said Millard. “There has been a struggle to find diverse candidates to onboard into management-track positions.”

“I’ve seen several organizations make significant moves in their thinking about diversity and inclusion,” said McBride. “There are a lot of organizations asking about it with a desire and intention to do so because they know it’s good for the business. There’s more work to do to make sure we recruit people from different backgrounds. Diversity and inclusion is a mind-set: a way of thinking and being. We have to be thoughtful and intentional about challenging ourselves to do things differently.”

More diverse leadership starts with a more diverse employee base. That’s a challenge for an industry that traditionally recruits from male-dominated occupations. And varied demograph-

ics mean that finding diverse candidates is simply easier in some geographic areas. But it can be done.

“We used to prefer to hire only people who have experience in the industry,” said Schaffer. “We may have to hire someone from outside the industry. Having years of experience in sales is more critical than knowing the electrical industry. We can teach them product knowledge; we can’t teach them character or work ethic.”

Schaffer noted that the company focused on recruiting from outside the industry for the past year, so it’s too soon to make long-term predictions about its success. But she found the process easier than expected. “It wasn’t difficult. We had a lot of diversity in the candidate pool without too much effort on our part.”

Millard agreed that refocusing recruiting efforts is the most efficient



way to improve diversity of all kinds. “You have to make it a priority in your recruitment strategy. Onboarding women and candidates of diverse backgrounds has to be a strategic imperative. It’s an uphill battle, but it’s certainly doable,” she said.

“You have to actively go into the community and find diverse candidates,” she continued, adding that this often means working with high schools, technical colleges, or local organizations that provide job support for the community. “You have to start somewhere. Whoever is responsible for recruiting should provide a KPI for a certain percentage of candidates who represent diverse communities.”

Recruiting from outside the industry does mean the company will have to provide additional support to bring

those new employees up to speed on industry-specific issues and technical information. Some companies have found ways to turn that extra step into a long-term benefit. When training resources are more available, it benefits all employees and creates an environment where women and minority employees in particular feel more supported—and more likely to stay and move up the ranks.

Schaedler Yesco, for example, has started SYDU—a robust, in-house training program open to all employees. Classes cover all aspects of distribution, including general product knowledge, communication skills, finance, organizational skills, and leadership development.

“The reason we developed an internal platform was to develop all of our

people,” said Schaffer. “No matter where people came from or what their role in the company was, we wanted them to have their own shot at developing their own career—whatever that might mean to them. They can take these classes and prove to themselves: ‘I can learn and develop and propel my career on a path I want.’”

SYDU is open to all employees and is voluntary, although the company encourages participation with the use of bonuses. “We expected about 80% of employees would complete 10 to 20 hours of training—enough to get the bonus—in the first year,” Schaffer said. “Ninety-five percent of employees completed the requirements. Some have completed 80 hours.”

Schaffer noted that even though the program is only about a year old,



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the company has seen early results, including promoting several people from the warehouse to the counter after finishing intensive product training. “We think it will help at all levels in the long run. That’s the goal,” she said.

At Van Meter, progressive and continual improvement is a core value—for the company and for each individual who works there. “Across the board, we’re trying to build diversity in thinking and challenging the status quo,” explained McBride. In practice, that has included bringing in speakers

“Diversity and inclusion go beyond gender and race—it’s a way of thinking,” said McBride. “I’m a big proponent of diversity being more about leaders and individuals having an inclusive mind-set and being more open to differences—not building teams of people that all are alike. It also includes where they worked before, their upbringing, etc.”

Industry-Wide Efforts

While individual companies can do a lot to improve diversity, broader

education offering, builds community in our industry, and provides a platform to find diverse candidates and give them a leg up on the job.”

She also stressed that LEAD and similar programs provide inherent mentorship for future leaders, especially women who have fewer role models like them to turn to. “When someone is selected to go through LEAD, it really changes the trajectory of their career,” Millard said. “People need to know they are valued and that management is actively assisting in developing them and advancing their career.”

Training and networking opportunities for those who have entered the industry are important. To find those people in the first place, more people need to know about electrical distribution and the benefits of working in it. “We have an opportunity as we advertise and recruit to our great industry to market our industry in a way that is appealing to people who may not have considered working in electrical distribution,” said McBride. “What we do is in every household and community we all live in. Our organizations play a powerful role in powering this world—who wouldn’t want to work in this industry?”

Millard noted that current events provide a great opening for touting the industry’s benefits. “With the advent of sustainability at most companies, there is more focused attention on how important our industry is in reducing the carbon footprint and working toward building a better climate future,” she said. “The time has come to really look at our industry as part of a big solution provider for the future. Everyone is engaged now in saving the planet, and we have the solutions.” ■

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Industry-level programs play an important role in creating the space for women and others to build their industry networks and access learning opportunities.

to discuss diversity topics as well as creating a women’s education and networking group, Women of Van Meter. McBride said the group is an opportunity for women to connect with one another across branches and workgroups to learn new skills and share experiences.

Events held by Women of Van Meter are open to male coworkers, including one who sits on the planning committee. “Men are encouraged to attend,” said McBride. “Women want parity; if we segregate ourselves in our own areas and don’t educate genders together about these issues, then we’re working in a vacuum.”

McBride said employee response to the six-year-old group has been very positive. “In general, women are appreciative of the investment, education, and networking opportunities,” she said. “If we can help women feel stronger, more confident, and set up for success, that is a path to explore other roles in the company.”

changes require more concerted efforts. Industry-level programs play an important role in creating the space for women and others to build their industry networks and access new learning opportunities.

“Programs like LEAD that bring people together to share experiences and learn from others have a ton of value,” said McBride, adding that self-assessments that attendees take at LEAD are a help to all potential leaders, especially women. “It can really help them learn about themselves and understand leadership from a different perspective. If a leader can take one or two things away and integrate it into how they work and lead others, it can be powerful.”

Millard noted that especially for smaller companies, it’s a challenge to provide those kinds of opportunities to leaders. “I’m a huge fan of NAED and everything it has done to provide educational tools to distributor partners,” she said. “It has a best-in-class

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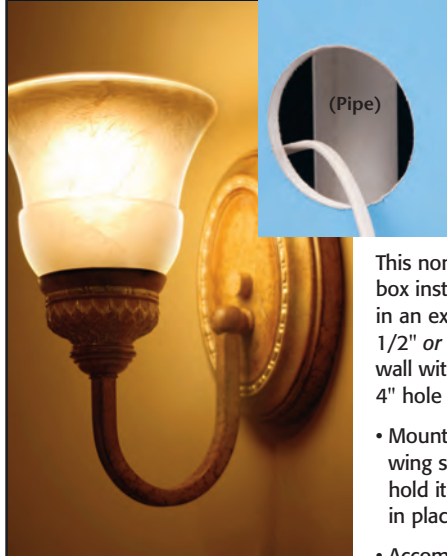
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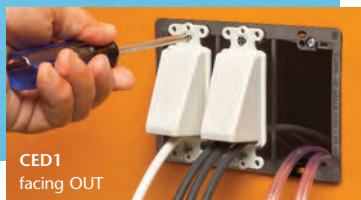
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“It doesn’t just matter how successful you were at the end of the day; it matters how you got there. If I can go to bed at night knowing that I did the right thing, I can rest easy.”

—LINDSEY CROPPER, manager of talent acquisition, United Electric Supply

Lindsey has worked in electrical distribution for four years and serves as the manager of talent acquisition at United Electric Supply in New Castle, Del. She aspires to lead the company’s HR department when the current leader retires.

How would you define your leadership style? My job as a leader is to ensure that my team has everything they need to excel. Whether it’s development opportunities, training, or coaching, if they have the tools to be successful and the motivation, they will be unstoppable.

What are your favorite and least favorite things about leading others? My favorite part of leading others is seeing other people in the organization do great work and knowing that I helped them uncover that potential in themselves. My least favorite part of leading others is when someone has potential but lacks motivation. It’s so disappointing to see that potential go to waste.

What values are most important to you as a leader? Embracing change is No. 1 for me. It can be tempting to want to cling to what has worked in the past, but everything is changing so quickly now that organizations can’t hesitate if they want to win.



LINDSEY BY THE NUMBERS

22 / Lindsey loves to travel and has been to 22 of the 50 United States.

2 / Two pooches live in Lindsey’s household: Louie and Roxie.

1 / Lindsey is mom to one daughter: Keira.

64 / A closet full of shoes—64 pairs, to be exact—signal Lindsey’s “serious shoe obsession.”



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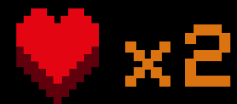
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