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Industry Veterans Speak

On the Past, Present & Future of the Components Industry: The Company with the Best People Wins by Melinda Caldwell

You can build buildings. You can buy equipment. But if you don't develop people and take a sincere interest in them, you will not succeed. It starts with a true heart-felt love for people."

Abner Yoder of Stark Truss Company, Inc. (Canton, OH) joined four of his industry peers at the WTCA Headquarters in Madison, WI on January 15, 2002, to discuss the history of the truss industry, the challenges they've experienced and overcome during their decades in the business, and their insights on what lies ahead for the industry at large. Rip Rogers, recently retired from Trussway, Ltd. (Houston, TX), Roy Schiferl of Woodinville Lumber, Inc. (Woodinville, WA), Don Hershey of Imperial Group, Inc. (Sugar Grove, IL) and Staton Douthit of Douthit Consulting Service> (Van, TX) joined Yoder in discussing a wide range of topics, but personnel was one of the first topics raised when the group was asked, "If you had one thing to say to people who are just getting into the component industry, what would you tell them?" Yoder's colleagues spent almost an hour building on the sentiment of his words above.

A GOOD PLACE TO WORK

"Create an atmosphere that makes people want to come to work and give an effort equal to their ability," Rogers began, as he took the first shot at the question posed. "Don't make them try to do something they're not capable of doing." He recalled a saying from a plaque his wife gave him to hang in his office that hits the nail on the head: "They don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."

Hershey agreed, "I don't think you can underestimate the value of people. I feel that a corporation reflects this from the top down, and the top manager has to care about people. If you don't [care about people], you just won't build loyalty and trust."

Loyalty and trust can be developed through showing that you care in a number of different ways. Truly valuing people means knowing and understanding them, and not putting yourself as a manager or owner on a pedestal above them. For example, Douthit commented that when he owned his truss plant, he made it a point to know the name of every person in the plant.

"People have names...and they like to be called by those names," he said. "I never expected any employee to do any more than I was willing to do."

"If you help your employees, the people you're responsible for, achieve their goals, they will help you achieve your goals. It's a principle I believe strongly," stated Yoder. "A caring attitude

that comes from your heart really goes a long way."

TIMES HAVE CHANGED—PEOPLE HAVEN'T

During the course of the conversation on personnel and the need to care for and develop good people, the discussion turned to the biggest changes this group has seen in people over the course of the last 40 years. Schiferl pointed out that helping people deal with issues outside of work is more of a need today than it has been in past decades. "You have to spend more time caring about people because people have greater needs," he commented. "If they don't have a good family behind them, you become their second family."

"I've always believed that a person wants to do a good job," remarked Hershey. "And fundamentally, a manager's responsibility is to make it available for them to do a good job—provide them with the right equipment...the right atmosphere...the right information...the right training. If you do that, people want to do a good job...I don't think that's any different today than it was 40 years ago."

On the whole, the group agreed that people's skills have changed enormously, particularly where computers are concerned. Douthitt described employees today as more savvy and resistant to change due to a more questioning nature. And while it bothers some that people today often have trouble adding a column of numbers on paper, most are amazed by what people are capable of doing when you sit them down in front of a computer. "As a whole, people are brighter today than they were 40 years ago," remarked Hershey.

What has changed in the last 40 years, as Rogers pointed out, is the way you have to handle people because of various laws and government regulations. "Years ago you could afford to get close [to your employees]," he stated. "And now you can't afford to get up close and personal. It's unfortunate. It changed my management style quite a bit over the years."

Hershey agreed that some government regulations really inhibit the ways you can care about your employees in today's litigious culture. "There are times when the rules keep you from doing things that you would do out of the courtesy of your heart, and now you can't because you're afraid of discriminating."

Despite the myriad of laws and regulations that employers are now faced with in dealing with personnel, Yoder pointed out, "there are still things you can do so [your employees] know you care for them." One example he gave that has been implemented to great success at Stark Truss was the appointment of a licensed chaplain who is available to communicate confidentially with Stark's employees. This is just one way his employees are cared for on a level that goes far beyond the day-to-day operations of the plant.

Indeed, it does all come back to caring for people. With more than 200 years of combined experience in this industry, the five men can attest to the fact that caring for, providing a professional environment, and investing in people is paramount to building a successful business.

"The business is all about people," Schiferl stated. "The one with the best people wins...We can

all buy the same equipment and have exactly the same plant set-up, but its really about people.”

Look for more articles of this nature in future issues of SBC Magazine. This group provided us with valuable information on the development of the industry and the lessons they learned as participants in that development. SBC Staff looks forward to sharing more of their insights with our readers.

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