

Training Article
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BAD NEWS FOR THE MASTER SERGEANTS

Master Sergeants. Past Hall of Famers. Resident Experts. Senior Alumni. Founding Fathers and True Originals. Let me be the one to break the bad news to you all. On the topic of the new breed of apprentice. The new breed of apprentice is NOT going to be you. The new breed of apprentice is NOT going to learn the same as you did. The skills, technologies and relevance of his or her instruction will be completely different from yours. Technology is their life and it is likely not yours. The market is totally different than when you came up in the trades. They don't care what you did or did not do. To them, you are old and barely relevant. Every hard earned stripe on your sleeve means little to them. Do not get pissed. Do not give up. Do not stop trying to understand.

Toughest of all? Our Baby Boomer Generation work ethic (that we simply expect others to adopt) and how we resent it badly when it is rejected. All of these things are road signs of our age. Of our resistance to meeting them half-way. Of our stubbornness. Of our foundational values eroding before our very eyes. Oh yeah, and did I mention they cannot follow in our footsteps and we need to adapt?

The truth is that they cannot, will not and SHOULD NOT follow in our footsteps and it is time we accept the fact and adapt.

Many apprentice instructors (over the age of 45 especially) have serious biases about how training MUST be done based on their own personal experiences. Those experiences are often twenty or more years old. Many have a major predisposition to having the perfect 'well rounded' apprentice who can do and be what they were. Many want to cover things the same way, in the same sequence with the same emphasis that they did. For us to succeed we cannot clone the people we were. And so, we must create miracles with what raw materials we have; remember, diamonds begin as coal.

Here are four things that we are collectively going to need to do;

1. Accept technology like never before. Is your union recruiting on My Space? Can I take a virtual tour of your training center on streaming video? Do you have plans for distance learning yet? What happens when you type in the name of your craft into You Tube? If you can't answer these questions affirmatively now, then you are a buggy whip waiting to happen
2. Eliminate old line or traditional barriers and artificial numerical limits to indenture. Simply take the total number of journeyman attrition per year, and add that many apprentices EVERY YEAR PLUS the average number of drop outs from that class for the next four to five years. Simply put, the numbers you are using now are probably based on old school practices and not real numerical analysis. Anything less is a membership hemorrhage.

3. Embrace specialization. Today's marketplace demands super high skill or super high production. The dollars paid do not always correlate. Accept the fact that we may need to bring in many non-union semi-skilled who did not follow the 'holy path' of apprenticeship; and we cannot judge them or look down on them as a result. We are fighting for our lives in the marketplace and it is not time for philosophical discussions or exclusionary practices.
4. Meet them where they are, not where you used to be. Less likelihood of you getting an ulcer or wanting to frequently whack them on the head.

As a Baby Boomer like many of you I feel the pain. In my Survival of the Fittest speeches to more than 4000 apprentices across the US already in 2007 I can tell you I feel frustration almost every time in seeing the faces and potential I know I cannot reach. But also I know for me to be successful I must put aside my personal bias; my personal story and history and see them for who they are; young men and women with a world of potential and a totally different set of values and beliefs that I must understand and adapt to. And despite the discomfort, it is with pride that we can embark on this ongoing story of raising human potential and doing the right thing; with only one thought on our minds.

'Hey Gunny, pass me a drink.'

Mark Breslin is a trainer and author specializing in labor-management challenges and solutions. He is the author of the recently published Attitudes and Behaviors: Survival of the Fittest curriculum for apprentice training centers. The curriculum is now being used by union training centers, and has been established as standard course programming by other International Unions and apprenticeship programs. Instructional material including books, CDs, workbooks, instructor guides and support media information is available at www.breslin.biz.