Addressing The Skilled Trades Shortage

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Have you ever wondered how we can give manufacturing the recognition and attention it deserves? Have you ever wondered if we're doing everything we can to attract the next generation of skilled workers to the manufacturing industry?

Manufacturing is interesting, challenging, motivational, and an excellent place to learn and grow. It is all about mindset, attitude, innovation and creativity, and making a quality product. But the manufacturing industry has to do a better job of marketing itself.

There's a great German saying: "People with a trade have a golden foundation."

Many people believe that today's youth don't want to work hard. As I recall, the same thing was said about my generation when I was a teenager. Can it be that our youth needs to be managed differently, that they are motivated by different things and expect more freedom in how they do their jobs? Kids today are no better or worse than we used to be, they are just a different generation.

So how can we get our youth interested? Some examples could be field trips to manufacturing plants; manufacturing leaders going into schools to give presentations and answer any questions students may have; greater promotion of apprenticeship programs; and co-op positions or internships in the manufacturing sector, just to list a few.

As a manufacturer, it is your responsibility to go out and initiate these collaborations with academia. Some companies do this very well, but not enough manufacturers are collaborating in this manner, maybe also because of a lack of awareness.

These days we can no longer speak about change, we have to talk about transformation. The industry is being transformed and so should our educational system.

Have you ever noticed how curious little kids are? Their favorite question is “why?” Little children have no fear of the unknown. When they learn to walk, they try, they fall, and they try again ... because failure is not an option, and they are curious to see the world from a different perspective.

Unfortunately, we “unlearn” this natural curiosity at school. All of a sudden, we are the ones who have to have all the answers, otherwise we are easily labeled as not being smart enough. For many years, we do nothing but answer questions and anxiously wait for graduation day.

For many of us, landing our first job is a significant milestone, and then we start

working and stop learning. We enter the workforce, and feel happy and relieved that our school days are over. This is the time when we would rather secure the right answers instead of pursuing the right questions. Isn't it mind-boggling that we spend 12 or more years in school and university before we even start our career and then in a constantly changing world forget about learning as a way to keep current?

Inspiring our youth by implementing a learning culture in our work environments is key to staying one step ahead of the competition. New technologies, innovation and creativity are things in which the next generation is interested.

We have to communicate to our young people and their parents that manufacturing has a future in this country and what it will look like. It’s our role and responsibility to create this vision and to communicate this vision. Let’s be more observant where we can find young talent, and let’s utilize their power of creation and imagination to the benefit of our country.

We have to help people realize that learning can be fun when you stay open-minded and curious about everything you see throughout the day. Curiosity cannot only be fun, but it will also benefit our work environments in many new and exciting ways as we embark on a new manufacturing era.

I am currently establishing a partnership with the Society of Manufacturing Engineers (SME) to create a Youth Award to increase awareness in the manufacturing industry, our schools, colleges, universities and also within our society. There is a lot that can be done to inspire young people to commit to a different form of learning, and create a new level of wealth and well-being for our society.

It is having a passion for what you do that makes a job sexy. We cannot manufacture passion, but we can educate, inspire, lead and succeed.

We are the subject matter experts. We are the teachers. We are the ones who lead by example. We are the ones who need to be dissatisfied with the current status quo, take on the challenge and make improvements. We have to create change.

This change will start with every single one of us, because if we don't get better, someone else will. And if we don't make manufacturing more attractive to today's youth, we will lose this potential pool of labor to another sector or another country.

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