

The Abuse of Apprentices Stops Now

By Mark Breslin

“I can’t believe I signed up for this s***.”

And so began a tale of stupidity, short-sightedness and tradition that reflects a broken culture and wasted talent.

The words were spoken to me by a young man in March 2017 after I gave a presentation to 400 young people serving their union apprenticeships. During my talk, I asked a question that I have been asking for over 10 years to well over 100,000 union craftsmen and women: “How many of you during your apprenticeship were hazed, teased, called names, given meaningless work, ignored or not taught because the guy in front of you was afraid for their job?” And in that room, like the other 200 times before, 95% of the hands slowly rose into the air.

Ninety. Five. Percent. In the year 2017. Not 1970 or 1990. Today. Now.

The young man in question approached me at the end of my presentation. He waited until everyone else had left. He told me he had military leadership experience. He had seen and done more than any of his apprentice peers. He had joined a union and the apprenticeship to again be part of a team that cared about each other—but he found something entirely different.

His experiences included being degraded; given little to no mentoring or instruction; seeing his peers called names (though no one would do it to him as he had that look in his eyes); and watching poorly performing Journeymen treated with more attention and respect because they were friends with the foreman. He felt he was part of a team only when it was funny to treat the low man on the food chain poorly.

Here is the future of our business. The ideal candidate, signing up with exactly the right reasons and a perfect foundation for success...but it had only taken him two years to go from enthusiasm and belief to “I can’t believe I signed up for this s***.”

This legacy practice of mistreating and degrading apprentices needs to end *now*, and it is the contractors first — and the union second — who have to start taking a stand. The current crop of apprentices needs to be the very last that are ever abused in the apprentice system as a stupid excuse for developing our young talent. It is being done by insecure people who had it done to them. And it is, decidedly, over.

I know some old-school guys are going to tell me that if you don’t have thick skin, don’t sign up; if you can’t hack it, then you don’t belong. I disagree. Talent development is not about hazing or mistreatment. It is about instilling confidence, skills and belief through mentoring, guidance and coaching. This is not always common behavior in an industry that prides itself on toughness and independence. As well, many are going to say that the Millennial Generation is soft and has

received too many trophies for too little effort. While some of that may be true, it doesn't justify poor behavior at the jobsite on the part of Journeymen whose pensions will someday be paid by those very same apprentices.

I would like to suggest three solutions to this challenge — one for the apprentice training staff, one for the contractors and one for the union leadership — so each can play a part in a constructive evolution going forward.

First, apprentices must be given a true picture of what they are going to face. We cannot ignore the fact that this is going to be part of their experience. In my book, *Survival of the Fittest* (and especially in the accompanying workbook), I outline roleplaying behaviors for classes to engage in and discuss. Spend ten minutes at the end of classes doing roleplaying. Stand back and watch the wheels turn. How does an apprentice deal with hazing? How do they respond when told to “slow it down”? How do they ask for assistance or mentorship? How should they go about earning respect on the job? These are not technical skills but *jobsite survival skills* that every apprentice needs so they can get through the wringer until we change the culture.

Secondly, contractors need to draw the line: if you abuse, haze or mistreat an apprentice, you are fired. Foremen are expected to develop apprentices or at least match them to Journeymen capable of maximizing their ability. Companies need to move away from the idea that apprentices are cheaper labor with limited skills and begin developing them as our future leaders and workforce. A change in mindset needs to precede a change in behavior.

Finally, unions can help by standing up for apprentices and giving them the camaraderie they were first offered. The best part of being in the trades isn't the money; it's the people and the work and the pride that comes with doing something that you feel is important. Sharing that with others and seeing it play out every day, with everyone having each other's backs, is what it's all about. Every union in North America might consider an annual “Mentor of the Year” award for the Journeyman who is tops in development of apprentice talent. Make it visible. Talk about it at the hall. Put it in the newsletters. Bring the brotherhood (and sisterhood) back to union affiliation.

In summary, it is time for a change. Not every apprentice is going to make it, and we aren't running a babysitting service. If an apprentice doesn't have the heart and passion to be a tradesperson, maybe they need to do something else. But for every young man or woman who comes to us offering us the next 25 years of their life—their blood and sweat and best effort—we deserve to give them more. And the time is now.