AWCI Education Means Quality Assurance

Juan Meza, President of J&E Plastering, Reports How the AWCI EIFS Education Program Has Helped Boost His Bottom Line and Raised the Bar in the EIFS Industry

"I can see the difference in my employees' work before they took the AWCI [EIFS Education and Certificate] program, and what it is now," says Juan Meza, president of J&E Plastering, Inc., Tri-Cities, Wash. "It is really worth it to get these programs. The managers like them, and the employees like them. Everybody likes them."

Meza adds that what the customers like is the result of this training—superior workmanship.

Meza has always worked hard to do his very best—even against formidable odds. He arrived in this country from Mazatlan, Mexico, in 1981, at age 16, all alone. In 1983 he met his wife-to-be, Elvira. "We had both been through difficult times and difficult situations, and we got together to help each other through them," Meza says. "I have always gotten a lot of support from her to help me succeed in this business." Elvira's name represents the "E" in the firm's name, J&E Plastering.

But Meza, of course, did not start out with his own business. "I started out at the very"
bottom of this industry, cleaning up, running errands, delivering,” Meza says. But by 1984 he was adept at using the tools of the trade, and by 1987 he was a manager. In 1992 he was invited to become a partner with a former employer. At the time he was based in San Bernardino County in California, but made several trips to Washington for a project in the Tri-Cities area. Meza saw the area was growing, with a lot of opportunities, and without the intense competition he was experiencing in California. So, after talking it over with Elvia, Meza decided to move the family north and start his own business.

“I knew from the start it would be hard,” Meza says. “But I found that being on my own I could make all my own decisions and communicate more freely with my customers. This gave me the opportunity to ask people what they really wanted and to do the job for them just the way they wanted. I found that doing it the right way the first time always solved problems in the future. Since then my goal has always been to do it the right way, in the best way possible.

“I consider myself a person who is responsible. I give the customer the most satisfaction on every job I do, and I try to improve the quality of my work with every new job I take.”

Meza has continually received compliments from suppliers, homeowners, contractors and even competitors, and has never received a complaint regarding water penetration, efflorescence, decolorization, deterioration or anything else.

“I’ll work to build my reputation,” Meza says. “The more you’re known for quality work, the easier it is to get business.”

So, though while the AWCI educational program did not instill in Meza the drive for perfection (he already had that), it did provide the means through which not only he but also his employees could continually improve themselves. Here’s how it came about.

Reaching Out for Education

“I received the opportunity to become a special applicator for Parex,” Meza recalls. “They sent me to a seminar in Irvine, Calif, with plastering contractors
from around the nation. I learned a lot about the different systems we do regularly. I was glad to be trained that way, but I was feeling selfish. The people behind me in my company were doing their job too. I was helping myself, but I was wondering, how could I help them too? That’s when I found out about the AWCI program.”

The program is called “EIFS—Doing It Right.” It is a video/workbook set that instructs on correct application techniques of Class PB EIF systems. The set was developed as a way of getting this critical teaching to EIFS personnel by using the quickest and most convenient method. As an alternative, AWCI also offers a two-day class, which is presented in various parts of the country throughout the year.

Meza started this EIFS educational process for his company early this year. One thing he especially likes about the AWCI material is that it is offered in both English and Spanish, because his work force roughly divided between the two.

“What makes this program interesting is the combination of the books and the video,” Meza says. “I think that if I just gave my guys the book, there would not be that much interest. But,
Since the program is offered in small, painless doses, the employees are not bored.

after they see the video, they go back to the book. On the other hand, if they just saw the video, it would be easier for them to forget what they learned.”

The educational process that produces such good results does not really take much time. “I encourage my employees to read the book a few minutes at night when they get home, or whenever they have time,” he says. “And we watch the video 15 or 20 minutes every Monday during our safety meeting.” That’s all it takes. Running the video 15 or 20 minutes per week means the video aspect is completed in about six weeks. Then it starts again. This provides a first-time experience for the new employees, and a review for those who have seen it before. Since it’s offered in such painless doses and is so helpful, the employees are not bored,” Meza says.

Meza explains that the situation was not that they did not do the job correctly before, but that previously there was a greater stress on the supervisors who had to spend much more time checking every little detail. Now the workers are much more knowledgeable and adept in critical areas such as water penetration, flashing, and slopes on concrete or roof areas.

“Another thing I’ve noticed is the increased knowledge on how to store materials correctly,” Meza says. “The employees really care about the materials now.”

But perhaps the most notable improvement since taking the course, he continues, is that employees tend to look at the job not as a series of isolated tasks but rather as an overall concept. “There is now much more technical communication going on among the employees
than before,” Meza says. “They’ve been improving their knowledge of expansion joints, control joints, and caulkings joints and fillings, and how they all fit together, which is very important for EIFS.”

Meza explains that education does not simply mean doing things right now that were done wrong before, but always finding a way to do it better. For instance, he explains, “We used to do a base coat over an insulation board. There’s nothing wrong with that. But then I read about putting a 100 percent acrylic primer on the base before the finish coat, which results in a more uniform, shiny and better finish. So I started using this primer, not because I was doing it wrong before, but as soon as I learn something new, if it’s an improvement—I’ll do it.”

The same is true in terms of equipment. “We used to cut the foam shakes, crown moldings or any kind of trim with a hand saw,” Meza says. “But then I read about a hot wire cutter that gives a very sharp corner and a cleaner cut, so we purchased hot wire cutters, even though they cost more.”

This attitude of continual improvement extends not only from the quality of the work, materials and equipment, but also to the appearances of the vehicles and equipment, how they are maintained, the way the work site is completely
cleaned up after a job, punctuality on all aspects of the job, and the way the workers conduct themselves, the attitude of respect they convey to all around them. “This is why nobody complains about my company, but instead gives us compliments,” Meza says.

**What’s His Motivation?**

Those in the construction industry often feel driven by price pressures to cut corners. Meza does not. “Basically, if you do it right, you will save money in the long run,” he says. “But it will cost a little extra in the beginning. We improve on production by having the right equipment and tools, by training our people, and organizing them so you have the best people in the right job.”

Although Meza has control over the workers and equipment, he doesn’t exert the same control, he acknowledges, over the material—which is the decision of the owner. “I have to understand the budget of my customers,” he explains, “and I feel I have to talk to them and explain to them what the difference and quality of the material is so they can make the best decision about what to do.”

If a lower grade material is suitable for any particular job, Meza will utilize it to fit with a client’s budget, or he will offer an alternative. “For instance, to do a stucco home it takes $10,000 to do a decent and secure job,” he says. “If a homeowner has a budget of only $6,500, then I’ll recommend wood or metal siding, which can do a good job for that price.” But if the owner says he has another contractor who can do the stucco job for $6,500, then the other contractor can do it.
our very best,” he says. Are his employees given any incentives to take this training? “No,” Meza replies. “The motivation comes from how they put that training to use. When their productivity in the field increases, they get a pay raise. That’s where the training really pays off.”

J & E Meza Plastering Employees watching the “EIFS—Doing It Right” video.

Unlike many contractors who focus on either residential or commercial, Meza, because his market area is not as large as it is in major cities, does both. “Basically, we do shopping centers, hospitals, schools, condominiums, apartments and houses. We open ourselves to every opportunity that comes along,” he says.

Meza’s business has grown steadily since the start. In his first year he had five employees: by the next year he had 10; by the third, 15; the fourth, 20; the fifth, 25; and this, his sixth year, 30. Annual revenues are $1.5 million.

Meza puts in long hours, arriving at work at 6 a.m. and working sometimes until 7 or 8 in the evening, up to seven days a week. “Whatever hours my business needs,” he says. But he also tries to spend as much time as he can with his family. He and Elvira have three children: Claudia, 16; Iania, 14; and Max, 10. For recreation Meza plays on a local baseball team.

But it’s obvious that Meza works hard too, as do his employees. “The AWCI educational program helps us to work at