Everybody recognizes the ultimate economic value of good education and training. But the translation from books to real-world business is not automatic. A college degree doesn’t necessarily guarantee a job. By the same token, the wall and ceiling industry recognizes the need for good education and training programs for any one of a number of reasons. But there is often a gap between theory and practice. How do you apply education and training programs in a way that will really benefit the business?

A good man to address these questions to is Chris Walter, vice president and general manager of Tri-Star Drywall, Inc., Denver. Walter has successfully grappled with these ideas both in his business and as recent past president of the Colorado chapter of The Association of the Wall and Ceiling Industries—International.

Turning to the business first, Tri-Star Drywall was started about seven years ago by Keith Callender and Dan Haltom, respectively president and vice president. Their previous employer’s company folded, but they had developed enough relationships with multifamily contractors to go off on their own. They started in March 1989, and brought in Walter six months later to pursue single-family work. Walter works as a general manager and also in estimating and sales. The commercial division, started two years ago, is headed by Dave Lawson.

The company did $1 million its first year and has clipped along at about a million a year increase ever since, coming in at just under $7 million last year. “For a new company we’ve had rapid growth,” Walter says. “We’re not the biggest drywaller in town, though we’re among the top five, but we try to be the best.”

Focus on Worker Specialties

Yet there’s an anomaly to this success story in that, as Water acknowledges, “We had some rough times with growing crews and superintendents. A lot of our problems stemmed from the inexperience of our labor force. Gradually we’ve settled down, and our reputation has vastly improved over the past couple of years.”

That raises two questions. How did the company manage to grow so rapidly if its inexperienced crews left it with a reputation that could be vastly improved, and what did the company do to ultimately solve the problem?
Over the short-term, Walter says, “We were always up front with our contractors, and we developed a good relationship with them. If we had a problem, we let them know about it, and also that we would handle it. We developed a loyalty that got us through some rough times. We lost a contractor here and there, but most knew we would put out an extra effort to get the job done right, that we always came up with an idea or plan to fix the problem. They knew we wouldn’t just sit on our hands, but would find a new superintendent, or move one from another location, or do whatever was necessary.”

A big change came about two years ago when Tri-Star hired a new field manager, Rich Shawcroft. He’s an experienced, hands-on manager, who provided close supervision and training, weeding out the inefficient workers and matching employees with jobs that best suited their talents. The company also committed to a single, texturing company, Dack's Texturing Service, which likewise made a commitment, providing a special focus in this specialized area.

Water notes that just a few years ago, drywall was relatively easy to put up, but now, with corner beads, archways and other ornate design elements, the work has gotten much more complicated. It requires more skill from workers who at the same time are becoming less interested in the field. What Tri-Star has done to cope with this situation is to train specialists, such as those working on corner beads. They alone will work on their specialty, saving money in the installation and also from not needing to come back later for repairs.

On the other hand, Walter noticed that workers coming to Denver from California tended to be too over-specialized, thus unable to do the whole job. So Tri-Star found a middle ground, training the employees to be neither too narrow nor too general.

Bilingual Classes for Workers and Supervisors

Meanwhile, Walter was dealing with a number of different, though related training and educational issues as president of The Association of the Wall & Ceiling Industries of Colorado, the local AWCI chapter.

One of his big projects has been developing classes in English and Spanish so supervisors and workers can better communicate with each other. “We identified a real problem, for over the past year or so the English-speaking worker has become a
minority in the drywall business,” Walter says. Tri-Star worked with Pro Translation Services in the pioneering pilot program, which offered classes for a year, starting in October 1995.

But there’s not always a direct connection between an educational program and its desired effect. For one thing, Walter explains, a number of the employees have no real interest in learning English because they simply work in the United States but maintain their families in Mexico. “Many have never had any formal education, and they come to class very timid and intimidated,” Walter says. “It can take several classes before they open up at all.”

The visiting Mexicans are hired legally, and are not hired because they can be paid less but simply because, as Walter says, “a decreasing number of young Americans are interested in our trade.”

The program has not proved optimal from the supervisors’ point of view either. “After they’ve already worked a 50-hour week, it’s hard to ask them to do another couple hours a week in classes.”

The solution to this problem, Walter says, is to make the whole process much simpler. “We’re developing a construction phrase book, which will make it much easier to communicate on the job, without all the problems connected to a formal classroom setting.”

The same dynamics of not simply putting an educational program out there and expecting it to take root, but rather continually analyzing and refining the results is evidenced by the AWCI apprenticeship program Walter started. This is a two-year course involving three-hour classes once a week. There are now 17 full-time students who have completed their first semester and are off for the summer.

Walter, along with the AWCI board of directors, began this
program having looked at previous efforts that hadn’t resulted in much success. “We wanted to make this very simple for people to get involved, without any intervening bureaucracy,” Walter says. The experienced instructor, Fred Cone, also believes in hands-on experience, with half the session being lecture and the other half lab.

There is also a lot of involvement from contractors and AWCI board members who go to the class and monitor what’s going on. They also talk to the students during the break, trying to see where the instruction is going and if the program is working.

Inspiring Students

Walter points out that high school counselors are pushing today’s youth toward college and not construction, despite the fact that drywall work pays well and offers good opportunities for advancement into areas like estimating sales, supervision and even starting one’s own company. Drywall work involves hard physical labor, and this is a key reason for its decline in popularity.

To this end, AWCI’s chapter executive secretary, Roberta Bourn, has been working with the Career Education Center, the public schools, construction trade programs and other organizations, to help attract youth to this industry, especially when many of them may not have good college opportunities. “We recognize that we have to make a real commitment to training to make it happen,” Walter says.

Walter reports that the Colorado AWCI has also been involved in a lot of other education-related projects. For instance, the safety group, which has been closely related to the AWCI Safety & Insurance Committee, meets monthly. Anyone in the association can join, and the intent is, simply, to reduce injuries. But a far from negligible side benefit is that the group has received a dividend check of more than $500,000 from the state compensation agency as a part of the program. This $500,000, Walter points out, divided among the nine contractor members,
with a portion going to AWCI, represents more than loose change.

Education is also one of the functions of the chapter’s regular meetings. “One of the biggest things we’ve done to improve participation at meetings is to have suppliers and manufacturers bring a product,” Walter says. “We will invite field workers, supervisors, estimators—everybody involved—so they can learn how to properly work these tools. These sessions are more than lectures; they involve hands-on participation with mock-ups.”

An ordinary meeting costs about $25 and includes dinner. But at these, the manufacturer or supplier usually picks up the tab. “Our membership has grown from 31 supplier/contractors up to 40 this past fiscal year, and we attribute this to our programs,” Walter says.

“What’s most positive about AWCI is that it’s created a real openness among contractors and a willingness to work together on issues,” Walter says. “It used to be we were all on the guarded side, as if we each had some special secret. But we all do the same kind of work. So by working together, we can help each other.”

Some of the educational efforts along these lines have been contractors working together to pressure other contractors into providing heat for drywallers and to making sure the schedules are reasonable enough to allow the workers ample time to perform tasks. They’ve also joined hands to encourage municipalities to standardize code requirements.

“It’s nice to see contractors working together,” Walter says.

About
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