



Where Have All The Young Men Gone?

By Mike Weinberg
Contributing Editor

Management and training are the theme of this issue of the magazine. These two words are so closely linked that they are almost the same in meaning. Learning is an ongoing process that never stops. I have come to some conclusions based on experience, observation and the mistakes I have made in the past four-plus decades. Here is my 2 cents' worth.

Management is the most difficult of all learned skills. Starting out as most people do in this industry, as a technician spending years acquiring the skill and knowledge to be good at diagnosing and repairing transmissions, does nothing to prepare you for running a business. In many ways it is similar to being a parent. We all have opinions about what our parents did wrong and how we should raise our children better, but in the end everyone starts out as an amateur and learns by trial and error.

Management is in itself a word that covers a vast number of connected jobs. There is no company in the world, however successful, that couldn't improve its management. In large corporations there are many levels of management reporting upward to higher-level executives. The president, CEO and CFO are involved with leading the company onward and can assign lower-level employees to

manage the day-to-day operation of all company functions. These titans of industry have great power and responsibility, but they aren't playing with their own money; they are playing with the shareholders' money. Although poor performance may get them fired, the golden parachutes attached to most compensation packages let them make a soft landing.

Creating more trained technicians is the future of the industry.

In a small business, management will be performed entirely by one or two people on average. The shop owners will wear many hats. They are responsible for advertising, payroll, sales, personnel, finance, production, purchasing, accounting, labor relations, etc. Management is a fluid skill, perpetually being refined and modified to accommodate the constant new challenges facing the business. We all know a number of talented transmission technicians who went from employee to shop owner and went out of business in a short period of time. Most small businesses fail in the first two years. Being a good mechanic is no guarantee of success as a shop owner.

I am not trying to discourage anyone from starting their own

business. On the contrary, it is America's history and the foundation of capitalism for employees to become owners of their own businesses. It is, however, vitally important to acquire the management skills necessary to become and remain profitable. These are survival skills, and I think all would agree that it is a mistake to bring a knife to a gun-

fight. The Japanese say business is war. They are correct, only this war is not fought with tanks and airpower; it is a battle to produce a quality product cost-effectively; gain market

share; maximize profits; have a skilled, stable work force, and accommodate change.

Acquiring better management skills requires a lot of reading, attending seminars, belonging to industry trade associations and keeping an open mind. It is not a one-time event but rather a way of life and an investment in oneself to ensure a bright future. It is perpetual training, exactly as technical training must be ongoing. Refining both skills is the future of the industry. Technical training never has been better or more valuable to this industry. Trade associations, trade publications, technical subscriber services and seminars are readily available to those wishing to improve themselves. Any business that does not

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make an ongoing commitment to furthering its employees' technical education is destined to fail.

I remember a popular song in the '60s that asked, "Where have all the people gone?" and as I look around our industry it seems to sum up the situation. Face it; new blood is not coming into this field. Shops looking for installers and rebuilders wind up pirating help from each other. The lack of new people coming into this business has many causes. I won't waste time on a discussion of why, but look toward finding a solution to this important problem.

As many of you know, I drive a race car professionally. The team I drive for has absolutely no problem recruiting skilled and entry-level mechanics. The hours are long, the pay is low, the pressure is tremendous, life on the road makes family life impossible and

yet they are turning people away all the time, because racing is exciting and has a natural apprentice system and hands-on training. WE HAVE TO MAKE THIS INDUSTRY EXCITING AND ATTRACTIVE TO YOUNG PEOPLE. We must work with high schools and vocational schools to create our own apprenticeship that offers a decent entry-level wage and TRAINING to create a much-needed technician with a FUTURE. Creating more trained technicians is the future of the industry. We need people who can read and retain complex information, use precision measuring tools, do fractional math and be able to learn electronic and hydraulic theory. People of this caliber are going to be thinking about a college education. Offering ongoing, comprehensive training and hands-on experience

leading to a good-paying career is the only way we can attract the right people.

Management and training may appear as nice words or something to do in the future when you have time. The cost of training, repair manuals, trade-association membership and the risk of having an employee trained at shop expense leave become excuses to do nothing. If you stand still you actually will go backward as the world passes you by. We live in the information age, and without a trained, stable, informed work force there will be no future growth. **TD**

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