Millennials: Speak their language and succeed together ...
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Recruiting

Amidst distractions

Epidemics and quarantines and protests and elections and economic uncertainly make it hard to think about recruiting. After all, we don’t know how many people we will need at a job site tomorrow, let alone next month. However, as leaders in the sheet metal industry, it is our responsibility to consider the bigger picture instead of only the many crises nipping at our bottom line. With apprenticeships lasting four and five years, we can’t wait until the bench is empty to start looking.

Recruiting is not something that affects only signatory sheet metal or the construction trades in general. Demographic shifts and, perhaps as important, characteristics of the up-and-coming workforce make it incumbent on all of us to identify the best and the brightest and adapt our strategies to ensure that they comprehend the opportunities within our industry.

Part of our challenge involves improving communication, which means using terminology that is meaningful to Millennials (and members of Generation Z.) The first article in this issue, on page 4, talks about that—and how to frame the story of our industry to be more attractive to those struggling to find their paths in life. Gabrielle Smith, a second-year apprentice with Local 25, points out that just like everyone else, the younger generations are attracted to good paying jobs with benefits, plus they want to travel and live the “good life” they see others living via their social media feeds. Careers in the signatory sheet metal industry can make such opportunities possible, but only if potential apprentices hear about them.

Further, according to many studies, most young people today want the benefits of having a mentor. While apprenticeship and mentorship are not identical, they have many aspects in common. See the article that starts on page 9 explaining how apprenticeship involves interaction with mentors and can help our industry appeal to many more of those who we would like to attract. Further, when these young, technologically savvy individuals enter our industry, they can provide “reverse” mentorship, even beyond teaching the boss how to use her smart device.

Beyond these and other useful articles in this issue, don’t forget about the other resources coming out of the joint Best Practices Task Force to help local parties supplement existing recruiting efforts. In June, we held another webinar on our recruitment initiative. This initiative uses an evidence-based approach to share information and create materials that can help you attract new recruits to the sheet metal trade. A link to the webinar recording and a presentation deck is available to members only from the Resources/Recruiting section of the Partners in Progress web site. That means that if you don’t have a userID and password for pinp.org and want to take advantage of these materials, you will need to register.

It is FREE! (Contact info@pinpmagazine.org if you have any difficulties logging in.)

Also in the Resources/Recruiting section, you will find an explanation of the SMACNA/SMART Brand Ambassador program that could allow your apprentices, journeypersons, office staff, and more to earn a $100 Amazon gift card just for posting to their personal social media images that demonstrate the skill, pride, and craftsmanship found within the signatory sheet metal industry. All posts must be tagged with our campaign hashtag #MJMG to be eligible. Further, there is a link to our Online Ordering System that allows you to customize and order any of the recruiting initiative materials—including new Spanish-language versions—for your area. Contact any of the individuals listed on the Resources/Recruiting page at pinp.org with questions about how to make use of these materials in your area.

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It's no secret that Millennials have often led the more seasoned generation in their adoption of technologies, but understanding that the differences extend beyond tech will undoubtedly help foster healthier working relationships.

“We’re a generation that is scared of failure,” says 23-year-old Caio Torres, a sheet metal worker in his third year of apprenticeship in Boston, Massachusetts. “I think this fear of failure comes from growing up in a school system where, if you get something wrong, there are no second chances. This breeds a mentality that if you fail, you can’t get back up from that. It’s not seen as a way to learn, to be better.”

Sprague agrees, adding that the pressures these days are different. “Millennials are expected to excel in every part of their life,” she says. “There is extreme competition to get into...
college, and it’s not enough to be a good student. You also have
to take advanced placement classes, you have to be a volunteer,
and you have to be an elite athlete. They are groomed to think
they have to be great at everything.”

Studies show that social media feeds into this, too, breeding
a generation with very low self-esteem. “Social media often
creates a false sense of perception,” Torres says. “Real life is
far from what you see in the images. I like to take a different
approach and will happily post something online and ask for
suggestions because I don’t know how to do something.” Torres
refers to his Instagram account @sheetmetalhvac, which has
around 2,000 active followers.

Understanding the unique differences between the generations
is also important. The values and goals of the Millennials and
Gen Z differ in many ways from the Baby Boomer generation.
Where many Boomers aspired for marriage, a house, two
kids, and a good retirement plan, Millennials have grown up
surrounded by divorce, extortionate house prices, and a “live
for the moment” attitude.

“Just like anyone, the younger generations are attracted
to good paying jobs with benefits first and foremost,” says
Gabrielle Smith, a second year apprentice with Local 25, at
Independent Sheet Metal Co. in New Jersey. “But we’re also
looking to travel and live these great lives that we see everyone
else living. All these things are expensive. So, if the sheet
metal industry could portray how this generation could have
all of that as a result of being a sheet metal worker, I think it
would certainly be attractive to the younger generation.”

Smith says she made up her mind to join the industry and
the union after hearing about a vacation fund. “To learn
that a certain amount of money an hour was deducted and
immediately put away for vacation use later, well, that simple
little fact got me. We like flexibility and variety. I think the
industry needs to show how flexible we can be while not doing
the same thing day in and day out. It’s not a 9-5. Many days it’s
a 6 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., and then you have the rest of the day to
yourself. I know all my friends are jealous of that fact. I get to
work, make money, and then go live my life after.”

Mobility also speaks to the younger generation, and being
able to take your career with you across the country, or the
world, in fact, is a selling point. “We are fortunate to be in
Millennials and Speaking Their Language

Millennials and Speaking Their Language

able to ask those questions and not be made to feel ridiculous for asking,” she says. “It feels great when you have someone above you telling you that you did a great job. I don’t think there’s enough of that.”

Once you’ve attracted the Millennial, what then? It’s time to rethink the career ladder, Sprague says. Millennials don’t necessarily want the same upward progression expected by Boomers and instead search out career satisfaction.

“There are two types of Millennials,” Potesta says. “The ones who believe in instant gratification, and those who want to consume as much information as possible because they want to be the best. Life today is so fast paced, and students want to learn so much more so they can move faster.”

Understanding these points is essential, but getting the message out there is not always easy. Potesta says Local 20 has been working with a local HR firm that specializes in all building trades, and they sponsor halfway slots at statewide basketball championships to reach both parents and kids.

“Getting parents to see the benefits and understand the sheet metal industry is a viable option with many benefits will lead to discussions at home,” he says.

Social media is another strategy that is being underutilized in the industry. Social media manager is a job that rarely exists in the industry because its importance is often overlooked. “I get really positive feedback about my career from my social media channel,” Smith says. “I’ve had many other women reach out to me and ask questions about what I do, looking for information to see if it may be a good fit for them, too.” Smith has an active Instagram channel @gabbersxxo. She suggests posting pictures of what sheet metal workers do and of the lives they live thanks to the industry.

Sprague adds that social media is a great way to educate the younger generation on the benefits of the union, and Torres agrees. “I didn’t go the union route, purely because I didn’t really know enough about it. I also didn’t want to start over again. Had I known what I now know, it would have been different. Educating the younger generation about the union through social channels would feed a far better understanding.”

Sprague says success in attracting Millennials and Gen Z will come when the industry learns how to work with these generations, understands how to empower them, and learns how to best make use of their skills. “We need to learn to utilize them in a way that brings our competition to the next level and modernizes the way we do things,” she says. “This will ensure our future success.”

Natalie is an award-winning writer who has worked in the United Kingdom, Germany, Spain, the United States, and Canada. She has more than 23 years experience as a journalist, editor, and brand builder, specializing in construction and transportation.
SIMON SINEK, author and motivational speaker, blew up the internet with his rant on Millennials (see youtu.be/hE0Qp6QJNU). I can’t tell you how much I disagree with much of what he said. And since a large selection of the Baby Boomer audience probably agrees with him, I wanted to set the record straight. I’ll take his points one at a time and discuss them.

He said that everything that is wrong with Millennials can be summed up in four distinct areas:

**Area 1: Poor Parenting:** Sinek claims that parents ruined this generation through entitlement where everyone gets a trophy. I have questioned many Millennials about this and most seem confused. Many of those I talked to did not receive the many trophies that are continually referenced by Baby Boomers. Do you know any Generation X folks and Baby Boomers with poor parents? Why are we targeting Millennials? Baby Boomers claim that Millennials are lazy, but many of the Millennials that I know work incredibly long hours; it’s just not during the traditional work hours. They are constantly working. Some examples of “lazy” millennials from *Inc.* magazine’s Top 20 Most Influential Millennials include: Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook and multi-billionaire; David Karp,
creator of Tumblr; Ben Silbermann and Evan Sharp, creators of Pinterest; Jessica Alba, founder of The Honest Company valued at over $1 billion; Mike Krieger and Kevin Systrom, founders of Instagram; and Brian Chesky, founder of Airbnb.

Area 2: Tech: Sinek says Millennials are addicted to social media. Do you know any Baby Boomers or Generation X folks who are addicted to social media? How often do you check Facebook each day? Why is this a Millennial issue? I agree that there should be periods throughout your day where you put your devices away. We recommend this to everyone, not just Millennials.

Area 3: Impatience: The claim is that this instant gratification world translates into Millennials expecting instant career mobility and instant intimate relationships and joy in their life and work. Isn’t this true for our society and not just Millennials? This ‘chases shiny objects’ emotional profile—high flexibility/low impulse control—shows up in some of the participants in our programs, and it isn’t just Millennials. There is an upside to this profile. These folks are constantly looking for more possibilities and different ways to do things. Why do we always focus on the negative? Have you heard of Stanford’s marshmallow test? Five-year-old children were given a marshmallow and were told that if they could wait 10 minutes and not eat the marshmallow, they would get two marshmallows. When the Millennials were tested they did better than any other generation. Hmmm. Maybe they’re not so impatient.

Area 4: Environmental: Sinek says that corporations don’t care about these young people and don’t give them the resources (training in social skills) to find joy and fulfillment in their work and their relationships. It’s the company’s responsibility. That’s the only thing that Sinek said that I agree with. I do believe that most companies care about their people. The key is to provide these resources and create organizations and projects that are relationship-driven and collaborative.

Look at the following quote and try to guess who said it and when it was said:

“Our (sons’ time) was worse than our (grandsons’). We, their sons, are more worthless than they: so in our turn, we shall give the world a progeny yet more corrupt.”

The answer? Horace, Book III of Odes, circa 20 BC.

This issue has been going on for millennia. This is not a generational issue. This is a communication/people issue. We have to get to know our employees and co-workers regardless of their age, accentuate their strengths, and help them with their development needs. Why don’t we talk about the positive stereotypes about Millennials? They are incredibly smart and socially conscious. They get things very quickly, and they can solve problems and figure out incredibly difficult issues in a short period of time. They work smarter, not harder. They are great with technology.

My advice to Millennials? Get off the phone, tablet, and computer every once in a while and seek out some human interaction and face-to-face discussion. This will help you in your life and career. (By the way, this advice will help everyone.)

My advice to the Baby Boomers? Quit complaining about Millennials. Get to know them and create a work environment that exploits their strengths. Don’t worry about their time on their phones or social media. Be clear on what you want from them, and give them autonomy and purpose.

Brent Darnell is owner and president of Brent Darnell International, which offers online and in-house training programs in lean, leadership, and emotional literacy to members of the construction industry. Darnell spoke at the 2020 Partners in Progress Conference.
AT THE 2020 PARTNERS IN PROGRESS CONFERENCE, SMART General President Joseph Sellers, Jr. took to the stage to talk about leadership. While the forum touched on a range of themes, Sellers underlined the importance of mentorship. “Our personal challenge is leadership and mentoring,” he said, stressing that mentorship is key in affecting positive change across the industry in the United States and Canada.

It was an interesting comment, and not one typically heard today, when in-class, online, and apprenticeship learning usually take precedence over any type of one-on-one mentoring or coaching. But there are signs that’s changing, or at least that more personal forms of training are considered important tools in developing competent, capable workers and future leaders. In a study titled, “Mentoring and Coaching Practices: Developing the Next Generation,” published by The New Horizons Foundation, 87% of executives and managers surveyed said they would “possibly” or “definitely” participate in a mentoring or coaching program.

So, if mentoring and coaching programs are so important today, why? What does good mentorship even look like? And how can labor and management work together to implement these programs?

The New Horizons study tries to provide some answers, and it begins by distinguishing between mentoring and coaching, which are sometimes used interchangeably. While both offer one-on-one guidance, the mentor is usually inside the organization, while the coach is usually an expert outside the organization.
of it. Coaching is also generally focused on developing specific skills that could be applied to many companies, while mentoring is more about developing relationships that might help the mentee navigate her specific company.

One thing coaching and mentoring do have in common, though, is their lack of popularity in the sheet metal industry. The New Horizons study found that over 80% of respondents’ organizations had neither a mentoring nor a coaching program.

There are likely a few reasons for that, particularly in recent years, says Guy Gast, president of Waldinger’s – Iowa division and past president of SMACNA. For one, the generation retiring from the industry is taking with them the soft skills they developed over the years that are necessary for good mentorship. At the same time, the recent technological shift across the industry puts many at a similar level of understanding. “While we can certainly see older workers adopting technology readily and quickly, the comfort level that people develop from mentoring programs comes from honing lifelong skills,” he says.

That doesn’t mean there aren’t excellent reasons for developing mentorship programs, he adds. In fact, they may be needed now more than ever to deal with the types of major technological and generational challenges the industry has seen in recent years.

One of those challenges is finding competent, capable workers—especially younger employees, the ones critical to the long-term success of the industry. But as the New Horizons study points out, mentorships may be one good way to attract those younger, Millennial employees because mentorships can help people find greater meaning in their work, something very important to this generation. SMACNA President Angie Simon agrees, and says those mentored employees could even be your best recruiters. “This is a generation that, if you can include them and mentor them, help them, pay attention to them, they’re going to share that story with their friends who are maybe working at a restaurant or wherever,” she says. “They’re going to share the story that this is a pretty cool place to work.”

Another upside of developing mentorship programs is that they can help foster good working relationships between labor and management. “It’s something that labor and management can and should partner on,” says Gast. “Not all training has to be delivered in a bricks-and-mortar environment. Anything that we can do to partner more in a local marketplace to universally deploy training is good because our people do move around from shop to shop. Part of the attraction of a union workforce isn’t just the availability or the skillset, but it’s the experience a customer has.”

The New Horizons study suggests establishing clear goals and objectives between the mentor and mentee at the outset, monitoring mentee progress throughout the program, and evaluating the mentorship program regularly.

Angie Simon also believes collaboration between management and labor is key. At Western Allied Mechanical, Simon has regular mentoring sessions with future stakeholders in the company who, in turn, mentor junior employees. That program proved so successful that Western proposed it to their partners at Local 104, and now every foreperson mentors a junior employee in the field.

Simon also believes that good mentorship starts with a firm commitment from the top. “Top management has to say they want to be involved, and they have to make it happen. They have to say to themselves, ‘I have an hour set up here for mentoring, and I am not going to miss it come hell or high water.’”

But Simon also says, because we are in a time of such profound technological change, younger employees comfortable with that technology can guide older generations making mentorship reciprocal. Joseph Sellers, Jr. echoed something similar at Partners in Progress: “It’s amazing what you learn as a mentor. It’s a two-way street. I have learned throughout the years how to be better from others and from being a mentor.”

Bottom line, said Sellers, nimble training is so important across the industry right now, and mentorship and coaching programs can be a key part of that training. “We want to make sure our members are well prepared when the call for work comes in.”

Jordan Whitehouse is a freelance business journalist from Vancouver, British Columbia, who writes for magazines, newspapers and online publications throughout Canada and the United States.
NEW JERSEY ROCKS! This may not be the official nickname of the Garden State, but it’s appropriate considering the remarkable resilience of its residents, despite shouldering the burden of having the second-highest number of COVID-19 cases and fatalities in the United States.

The can-do spirit was exemplified by Local 25, which not only took a leadership role in adopting safe work practices but also distributed protective masks and coordinated with other Locals to support and facilitate food drives.

So, it wasn’t a surprise when Local 25’s president and business manager, Joe Demark, was appointed to New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy’s Restart and Recovery Advisory Council, whose leaders from industry groups, labor leaders, and community organizations throughout the state advise on economic matters affected by COVID-19.

Demark, a third-generation sheet metal worker who serves on the SMART-SMART Best Practices Market Expansion Task Force, was tasked with ensuring that his 700 active Local 25 members stay safe at work and also lending support and advice to the construction sector as the government-imposed lockdowns eased.

And while Demark, who was born in Orange and raised in Springfield, credits SMART and other organizations for job sites getting back to speed under strict safety guidelines, he thinks a lot of the success is due to the mindset of New Jerseyans in general. “We’re fast paced, we hustle, and we’re street smart,” he says. “When bad news happens, we instinctively pull together and look ahead to better times, and that’s been the case with the pandemic.”

Long-time colleagues and signatory contractors think the Restart and Recovery Advisory Council picked their sheet metal representative wisely. When the great recession of 2008 hit, Denmark hit the ground running on a market recovery agreement that would benefit both the Local and contractors. One credited the agreement with creating 30,000 hours of work in the first year of implementation.
With about nine million residents, New Jersey reported 158,844 COVID-19 infections and at least 11,531 deaths as of the end of May. Construction was severely curtailed when the virus first spread throughout the state, and Demark estimates that activity in his Local dropped from 80% capacity to 40%.

One week after being appointed to the Restart and Recovery Advisory Council, Demark describes his daily routine as, “Taking staff calls, participating in video conferences, comparing notes, sharing ideas—and ensuring our members and others in the construction sector have easy access to safe work guidelines, relief programs, and other pertinent information as it becomes available.”

Demark’s appointment wasn’t out of the blue. His organizational skills have been honed by a variety of positions, including chairperson of Local 25’s Welfare, Vacation and Annuity Funds; vice president of New Jersey State Building and Construction Trades Council and the New Jersey State AFL-CIO; and president of the New Jersey State Council of Sheet Metal Workers.

It could be argued that Demark’s organizational skills also stem from regarding the sheet metal trade, not as a job but as a way of life. “My two uncles and dad were sheet metal workers, and every night as a kid at the dinner table I listened to their stories and caught the bug,” he says. “I started in the business 40 years ago and am 58 now. When trouble happens and our way of life is threatened, I do everything I can to help make things better.”

The New Jersey sheet metal sector is no stranger to social and economic hardship, and Demark has walked the walk in the most difficult times. In September 2001, he was one of many volunteers who combed through the rubble of the World Trade Center towers in the hopes of retrieving survivors.

“That was mass destruction and nothing but death and despair,” he says. “When the housing bubble burst in 2008 we were plunged into a recession that really didn’t let up until about four years ago. So, several months ago, when the coronavirus hit, many of us thought ‘Uh-oh: we’ve been down this road before.’”

As has been the case with so many trades in New Jersey and New York, the virus has hit close to home. “Six of my members were infected and one retiree and one active member died,” Demark says. However, this strengthened Local 25’s resolve to provide workers with personal protective equipment, organize food drives, and do grocery shopping for the retirees.

Demark stresses that one of the major tools facilitating the recovery of his sector is North America’s Building Trades Unions (NABTU) and the CPWR Center for Construction Research and Training’s COVID-19 Standards for U.S. Construction Sites. The document goes into forensic detail about training, screening, social distancing, decontamination, and other procedures to mitigate infection at any job site.

“The guidelines were a huge inspiration at Local 25 and in my role on the Restart and Recovery Advisory Council, and they are fairly easy to implement because the construction industry overall has a well established culture of safety,” he says. “Plus, so many of the guidelines are plain common sense and pertain to frequent sanitization and not sharing food or water bottles.”

Demark believes that as new construction in New Jersey moves forward, SMART and SMACNA are ideally suited to creating healthy environments. “Everything we do is geared towards indoor air quality,” he says.

As for the prospect of a second wave causing chaos on the Eastern Seaboard, Demark says, “Now we know how to do things. We’re ahead of the curve, and I would go so far as to say our mitigation and recovery models could be applied to other jurisdictions.”

Contractors and Local 25 members are already benefiting from the gradual reopening of the state, including more than 109 sidelined employees back to work—forward motion that is the direct result of Demark’s work.

Jerry Keenan, executive vice president of New Jersey Alliance For Action—whose mission is to improve the state’s economy through the promotion of capital construction and infrastructure investment—says, “Joe is old school in the best sense of the word, meaning he rolls up his sleeves and does what’s necessary to protect livelihoods. It’s good to know he’s one of the people behind the scenes in getting our economy restarted again.”

For his part, Demark insists that his drive is typical of his colleagues in New Jersey’s construction sector. “We’re all can-do people,” he says. “For example, our county building trades had great COVID guidelines in place even before the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention came out with theirs. That’s the way we do things in Jersey, and that’s also the attitude of SMART and SMACNA: be prepared and forge ahead.”

Robin Brunet’s journalism has been published in over 150 magazines, newspapers, websites, and other media across Canada and the U.S. since 1982. He is also the best-selling author of two books: Red Robinson: The Last Deejay and Let’s Get Frank, as well as the upcoming The Last Broadcast.
LISA DAVIS: MY JOURNEY

HVACR SERVICE & TAB SPECIALIST
INTERNATIONAL TRAINING INSTITUTE

I currently work for the International Training Institute as an HVACR Service and TAB (Testing, Adjusting and Balancing) specialist, where I have the opportunity to serve training centers all over the United States and Canada (around 14,000 apprentices!) in writing curriculum and books, helping equip training labs, and guiding apprenticeship instructors through their development as educators. I also have the fortune to work with the SMART Women’s Committee, where I am the policy subcommittee chair and facilitate presentations to Locals in and around mentoring, establishing women’s committees, diversity and inclusion efforts, and generally trying to make our apprenticeships and trade the best environment to be.

I have a somewhat long, meandering origin story, but the short version is that while I was in college for pre-med, I worked as a mechanic in a bowling alley. I really enjoyed working with my hands to fix mechanical failures, and when I realized along the way that I didn’t want to be a doctor and bowling alley work didn’t provide benefits, I stumbled across Oregon Tradeswomen. Through learning about apprenticeships and the different trades and doing quite a bit of welding and machining, I applied for the Local 16 apprenticeship. It’s been a wild ride, and I haven’t looked back since!

I love the variety of the sheet metal trade. Throughout my career in the field, I’ve been able to work in a shop, do architectural, hang duct in new construction and tenant improvements, work in industrial plants, high tech facilities, and hospitals, and—my favorite—service: HVAC and fan rebuilding.

I worked on the architectural for the Federal Building in downtown Portland, helped build an oil rig that went to Alaska, rebuilt a fan in the Moda Center, and have worked in more than a few clean rooms in what’s known as Silicon Forest. I’ve worked in most of the hidden mechanical rooms for schools, hospitals, factories, and plants around Oregon.

This has been a challenging path—especially for a woman breaking ground in a field as the first in her family—but every challenge has proved to be an incredible opportunity for me, and I know it can be for others, too. Everything I have encountered has proven a powerful learning experience. One of the most rewarding aspects for me in that regard has been teaching—bringing my perspective and knowledge to the apprenticeship at Local 16 as an instructor and now the ITI. I suppose I have solving things and figuring them out in my blood—whether it’s a broken component, a system, or helping someone identify who is struggling to learn.

▪
THE POWERFUL THING about a sports metaphor is that it is never really about the sport. Whether an all-star linebacker or someone whose idea of a warm-up is putting on a sweater, just about anyone can get the gist of the message, and that’s because it’s not really about rallies, tackles, or goals, but about resilience, tenacity, and grace.

“You miss 100% of the shots you don’t take,” said Wayne Gretzky. Abby Wambach said, “I’ve never scored a goal in my life without getting a pass from someone else,” and, according to Michael Jordan, “Talent wins games, but teamwork and intelligence win championships.”

It doesn’t take a state championship to understand the message these legends of sport are really getting at, and that’s why we love them—because we can relate and feel inspired.

Although widely known for his one-liner quotes of inspiration—“Hermisms” for die-hard fans—Herm Edwards’ signature line is just that simple: “Stay humble, be hungry.”

Edwards’ career, first as an NFL player and coach, then as an NFL studio analyst for ESPN, and now as the head football coach at Arizona State University, is defined by his energetic and enthusiastic attitude. He has enjoyed an impressive career with more professional and personal wins than you can shake a pigskin at. His professional playing career spanned from 1977-1986. In 1980, he earned second-team All-NFC honors and played an instrumental role on a hard-hitting Philadelphia defense that helped boost the Eagles to a berth in Super Bowl XV that season. His claim to fame was picking up the loose fumble by NY Giants QB Joe Pisarcik on the play known as the “The Miracle at the Meadowlands.”

Over his 20-year coaching career, Edwards racked up a slew of victories, including a 39-41 record over five seasons with the Jets, sideline presence for five postseason contests with the Jets, the best total of any coach in team annals. During his second stint with the Chiefs, he became the first head coach in franchise history to guide Kansas City to the playoffs in his initial season with the club. In his debut campaign, Edwards posted a 9-7 overall record, tying the mark of most victories by a first-year coach in franchise history.

At ESPN, Edwards’ used his diverse background in pro football to be one of the most informed and educated analysts on television, a commitment that, in 2013, earned him the honor of Team ESPN’s Commentator of the Year.

He joined ASU as head coach in December of 2017, and if you ask him why he left a cushy job in TV, he will tell you: “Because I wanted to bring a group of men together for a common cause. I wanted to go on a journey again.”

Whether it is his faith, his family, or his football team, Herman Edwards exudes passion in all areas of life, and it is this force, commitment, and humility that he brings to the stage to talk about leadership, team-building, and the true meaning of success.
“Stay humble, be hungry.”

He brought this iconic, simple advice, delivered with the confidence of a champion and the even gaze of a wise man, to close the general session at the 2020 Partners in Progress Conference.

Pacing the stage like it was a dressing room, eyeing the audience like they were one enormous, winning team, he implored listeners to have the courage to build strong teams by developing the confidence to change.

“It’s never easy,” he said. “Change always costs something. It costs time—our most precious commodity—energy; creativity; and attrition. If change doesn’t cost you anything, there is no real change.”

Edwards turns the conventional, directive leadership style on its head, asking leaders to view their roles and responsibilities as acts of service. “We are dealers of hope,” he says. “We provide information; we do not create talent. And, we serve others. We have an obligation to help people succeed.”

The way we do that is with good communication skills, a consistent message, and a firm grasp of the type of culture necessary in our organizations. There are two ways you lead: by your seat or by your feet. Edwards chose to spend his career leading by his feet. That means he knew the people he worked with, made sure his communication skills were his strongest asset, and made his presence known. “The people you lead want to see you,” he says. “They want to know your are right there beside them.”

That also means earning the right to be a leader. “You are either coaching it or allowing it to happen,” he says. “Leaders fix problems—but that job is overrated, because you always have a problem!”

Becoming serious he says, “Be courteous and show respect. It sets the tone for the team or organization. Be competitive and combative, but you can’t be emotional, because 99% of emotional decisions are the wrong decision.”

Team-building is more than rushing around, taking charge, and rallying people. Busyness does not equal productivity, and the truth is, good teams don’t just fall from the sky. Creating a good team means demonstrating intentional willingness to push through adversity into success and fulfilled potential.

“And, the potential is different every year,” Edwards says. “It’s a good idea to disrupt the calm and create chaos from time to time so you can see how the team will react. The way the team responds to challenges is a reflection of the culture set by the leader.”

Like any sport, a functional partnership requires a game plan, a mission, a set of principles everyone can get behind. That starts with attainable goals—does your organization want to win? Be more productive? Reorganize? “You decide,” says Edwards. “But, decide. A goal without a plan is a wish.”

Preparation is critical. Establish the why, what, and how of your game plan—in that order. “If you can’t tell the team why, you can’t lead them,” Edwards says. “There is a big difference between knowing what to do and how to teach it. If you don’t, someone else will.”

Edwards testifies that in preparing teams for success, it is essential to understand them, their strengths, weaknesses, dreams, and fears. He says that most people are “systems needy,” which means they are waiting for the system, plan, or organization that will make their talent shine. The problem is that leaders who build teams around systems fail because they haven’t invested the time and energy to truly get to know the team they have.

“Lead the team you have, not the team you wish you had,” he says. “Watch getting caught up in what you want and what you can do. Maximize your resources to be successful. Know your role, and do your job.”

It takes time to understand and develop each person’s role—but it is time and energy worth investing. Edwards points to the way, in football the quarterback gets all the attention and is the one on the podium, but in certain dire circumstances, the win or loss often comes down to the kicker.

“No one watches the kicker,” he says. “You throw $30 million to the QB and you cheer for him like a champion on the podium. But both the QB and the kicker only have one job. Don’t forget the kickers on your team. Show gratitude. Thank them. You have to make sure they know how important they are.”

It doesn’t really matter if your “game” is football or leadership or creating labor-management partnerships—his message is the same. “Stay humble, be hungry,” he says. “You play to win the game, but when faced with conflicting thoughts and desires you never compromise your integrity. It is not an option.”

“Your words and your actions must match up,” he adds. “What you do in the dark will come into the light, and when you are true to your integrity, the power of your name and brand will allow you to make a difference today with tomorrow in mind.”

Jessica Kirby is a freelance editor and writer covering construction, architecture, mining, travel, and sustainable living for myriad publications across Canada and the United States. She can usually be found among piles of paper in her home office or exploring nature’s bounty in British Columbia’s incredible wilderness.
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