

Meatballs

"You get no bread with one meatball."

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Meatballs is put out in the belief that a strong union at SHAP depends on an informed and involved membership. Meatballs welcomes different points of view. Contact Mike Parker, electrician second shift, body shop, or you can email meatballs@rts-tech.com. Publication labor is volunteer and views are those of the writers. For back issues go to www.rts-tech.com/meatballs

With the plant in turmoil, and management trying to cut us up salami style, why do I write mainly about training? We have to respond with solidarity to management's current use of the discipline knife. But we also have to respond to the long term poison which threatens to rot the core of the trades—our skills.

-MP

Training:

Setting Us Up for Failure

The training for the new line has started. For all of us, but especially those who might work in the body shop, the amount of new material is enormous (see Body Shop Electrical Notes, July 2005.)

Based on what I have seen so far, the training system is setting us up for failure. Please notice that I am talking about the system, not the specific classes. Some of the classes are good. Others require substantial improvement. But even the best classes can be part of setting us up for failure. While the situation for body shop electricians may be extreme, I think what I have to say here applies to other trades and other areas as well.

Take the recent two weeks of ControlLogix classes. Most electricians finished it saying, "I got something out of it, but I will need the class again when we have the equipment here in a year." The sad truth is that, unless things change, there will *not* be a repeat ControlLogix class in a year.

Presenting classes—even great classes—with enormous amounts of technical information is not effective if the learners don't have the opportunity to apply the information as they are learning and immediately after. This is not a secret. Every one of us knows this from direct experience. The result of this training system, unless it is changed, is that next year when the equipment comes in and the crucial debug period begins, a lot of trades people who have been "trained" will not want to embarrass themselves and will step aside while vendors do the work.

Why does Corporate promote our failure?

Yet corporate management insists on continuing this ineffective training. This is no mistake:

☞ Corporate management does not really care if we learn this material. Their strategy is to rely on vendors for the skilled work. (Floor level supervisors have different interests.)

"Off with Their Heads"

Management's idea of getting ready for the new model is not to train us for the new technology. They choose instead to bring in the hired gun who will make sure that we fall in exact line. Management mouths the words "involvement" and "empowerment." What their actions say is, "Upper management knows what is right. All we need to do is make sure that everyone carries it out." This Management-by-Stress method is simple: terrorize everyone so they will take it out on those below. If anybody still thought that we had some ownership of our areas and a corresponding responsibility, along with the production workers, to make things function right, the plant manager is certainly setting us straight.

Management has demonstrated that it measures everything by whether the line is running and how many heads are cut. Quality, training, rights, and respect are dealt with by showing us who is boss.

Does Corporate really know what is best? The Smart minicar, which is the DCX attempt to apply all the new techniques like modular, has turned out to be financial disaster (BusinessWeek 8/15). Bribery (NYT 8/6) and Bleichert conveyors are all corporate decisions.

Now we have a plant manager who comes in firing both guns without knowing much about *this* plant because he thinks he can copy Toyota. Virtually everything he does is opposite what they *claim* to be teaching in the new SMART classes. (In fact SMART and management actions really are all part of the same plan to weaken the union and slash the workforce—but that is another story.) Blind obedience and stepping on people can never make this a quality auto company. A workforce which demands dignity and respect and contributes accordingly can.

☞ Corporate wants the record to show that they have provided technical training. It makes it easier for them to outsource work to vendors when they can say that they trained us but we are not capable.

☞ They want the training on the record to justify the concessions that they won from the state and from localities. (Tax breaks are justified because they are providing new skilled jobs.)

☞ They prefer the "arrogant trades" to feel stupid and dependent on management and vendors for knowledge, because they can control things better.

Management is not concerned with us learning how to think and analyze situations. The only "training" corporate management cares about is that which gets us to follow their procedures and rules more exactly, like TMS and standardized work practices. You can be sure that we will be trained over and over on this.

What could have been done

Management will say that they are trying, but the problem is that so many classes are necessary that naturally some will have to be given long before the equipment arrives.

Again consider the recent ControlLogix classes. One of the hard parts of the class for those who use ICOM was getting familiar with the RSLogix software. This was completely *avoidable*. Three years ago there was a proposal for putting some copies of RSLogix 5 on the floor along side the ICOM so that electricians could take RSLogix classes at TTC and get used to it on their own lines. Management killed the project despite the fact that it would ultimately have saved many times its cost by the time of the JS launch.

Given the lack of appropriate equipment, the main value of the current class might have been to make people comfortable with using the software. But that goal was

Good training:

A thought experiment

Suppose that the apprenticeship program for skilled trades included really excellent classes at the local community college. But at work, the apprentice's job was never much more than to blow out and wipe clean a couple of machines. Suppose the apprentice had no journeymen to learn from, but a couple of times a year did get to watch a vendor come into the plant to construct or repair something. Would anybody think that a journeyman who graduated from such a program was sufficiently trained to do a job? Would anybody argue that the solution is more classes? Yet this is exactly the training system they are providing for us to deal with the new technology.

It is possible for a person to learn a trade through intensive study and apprenticeship for a few years if it is a good program. Once upon a time this was sufficient. Technology changed slowly enough that journeymen could keep up with changes in their trades by slowly picking up a little here and a little there.

That model does not work now. Changes in technology are rapid, with several "revolutions" taking place over the working life of a skilled worker. We need the apprentice model of a mix of classes and hands-on work with masters for the new technology. As skilled workers we either have to keep up or be left behind. For us, good training is a question of survival.

thwarted by requiring us to share computers. Nor did they help us learn where to find answers; The reference materials are poor and not designed for our needs. No refresher, or sessions for regular hands-on are scheduled.

Five months ago, knowing that all of this new technology was coming in, 14 body shop electricians submitted a proposal. We asked for equipment and software to be brought into the plant for us to start learning on, so that when classes started we would have the equipment to practice and maintain our skills on. We also asked for scheduling so that once people had their classes, there would be time for them to maintain their new skills. This proposal was submitted to several levels of management through the union. Management never even gave us the courtesy of a reply.

That is why I say that management is consciously setting us up to fail. The real question is whether we will go along in this charade or demand something better.

Our responsibility

Management has made our real choices clear. They want to move the skilled work out of the bargaining unit. The best union cannot protect our work if we do not have the skills. If we want to keep skills in the bargaining unit, we have to learn the skills. We have to demand that the union fight for a real training program and not simply a get-on-the-record process based on donuts, break-time, and circuses.

We have to press hard for training that provides the opportunities for us to actually develop our skills. Do we have access to the equipment, to the right test equipment, to reference materials, to refresher sessions, to the time for maintaining our skills, and to experts for assistance?

We have to evaluate classes on whether they provide us the opportunity to learn, not on whether the instructor is entertaining, the breaks are long, or they give us free lunch and screwdrivers. Learning can be a joy, but usually it requires effort. We have to demand that classes be designed for those who want to learn.

As a union we have to recognize that it is not possible for all of us to be experts in everything, even within our trades. In order to keep expert level work in the trades, we have to figure out ways to have specialization training, making sure that arrangements that guarantee fairness, like seniority and equalization, are built in.

Finally, we have to stand united and let management know that *when the equipment comes in the plant it is our work*. If that is the point where we first start learning, so be it, but we will not step aside because the "training" was a sham. We must make management understand that it is a problem of their own making.

—MP