

Selecting rough diamonds

by MARK BRESLIN

LAST YEAR I spoke to around 25,000 union apprentices of every trade. My job is to educate and inspire them as they prepare for the serious challenges that lie ahead. So in December, I was shocked to get a disturbing phone call from a client. The day before, I had addressed an audience of 1,100 craftspeople, of which 600 were apprentices. He told me, "Hey Mark, after your speech yesterday, two apprentices came down this morning and quit our program." I thought my client would be angry with me for running off his apprentices. But instead he said, "I just called to thank you for saving me from 20 years of dealing with a couple of guys who didn't know what they were getting into." I was relieved, but the real question for me was, how did those two guys get to be apprentices in the first place?

The union construction industry has perhaps the most old-school, ineffective and ill-advised method of selecting entry-level talent of any industry on the planet. In most cases, the process of screening new prospects has changed little in the last 40 years. This lack of professionalism, commitment and adherence to best practices costs contractors, owners and the industry tens of millions of dollars a year.

In the next 10 years the North American union construction industry is going to need anywhere from 100,000 to 250,000

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new apprentices to replace aging Baby Boomers. During this economic downturn, unions, contractors and those who run the joint apprentice training programs need to develop highly sophisticated screening processes if they hope to remain competitive in the future.

THE PROBLEM – AND THE OPPORTUNITY

Apprentice selection is one of the most important competitive tools available to labor and management. It determines the talent pool that will serve as the foundation of the entire industry. But today's apprenticeship evaluation and selection procedures are deficient. Most programs have some base-level criteria or testing that generates a list, which then becomes the reference source for entry-level talent. This often results in selection of sub-par talent, including many guys who will wind up quitting halfway through training. Or worse, it allows those without the necessary commitment, character or values to enter an industry and spend decades bouncing around from employer to employer.

By utilizing best practices in their screening and selection process, labor and management can avoid a lot of these problems altogether. A re-vamped evaluation system for new talent can accomplish a lot, including:

- Creating uniform standards and procedures to serve organizational growth objectives.
- Consistently recruiting the best available talent from a crowded field.
- Improving attitudes, work ethic and team orientation on jobsites.
- Reducing the percentage of apprentices who either drop out or are removed from training programs, and cutting down on those "lost" training costs.
- Creating greater peer-to-peer respect by implementing uniform performance expectations.

USE OF POLICE AND FIRE PROTOCOLS

A detailed face-to-face interview is vital to finding the right talent. For the candidates, it's their chance to make the

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a business trip to your plant? What about a business meeting at a resort? What are the rules?

Your anti-bribery policy should spell out exactly what corporate employees can and can't do. Contractors should

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put procedures in place that encourage and enable employees to ask questions when there is some doubt. These employees must recognize that any form of bribery is prohibited and those who violate the company policy will be fired.

The anti-bribery policy must be established by top level management. The CEO and president must endorse

the policy and make it clear to all that the policy will be strictly enforced — even if that means the company will lose out on certain bids. The risks of violating the law — including large fines, jail sentences and debarment from future bidding — must be fully explained.

Also, you should put in place a system for monitoring compliance and recognizing red flags. If you are told that the only way to do business with-out problems in Country X is to pay off certain officials and your company is doing business there with no problems, you should see that red flag waving. If a problem is found, your procedures should lay out what steps to take to investigate the problem, develop a course of action to deal with the issues involved and manage the risk in the most efficient manner.

Bribery is an issue that affects all companies, regardless of size. If you are the president of a small construction

company, don't assume that this can't affect you. If one of your key employees has paid off a contracting officer without your knowledge and is then discovered, their problem is now your problem. When that employee is asked whether you, as president of the company, knew about the payoff, he'll try to place the blame on you. If you don't have a clear anti-bribery compliance policy already in place, you'll have a tough job defending yourself.

We are living in an era when corporations are being held to a much higher ethical standard than in the past. Contractors can't afford not to address the issue of bribery. ■



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case for hiring them. For the employer, it allows the opportunity to carefully assess character, personality and desire, as well as general qualifications.

Unfortunately, in many apprentice programs, the interview process has been reduced to a brief series of basic questions presented in a very informal setting. Often contractors aren't even involved in the evaluation of their future employees. How does this make any sense? My suggestion is that the construction industry should adopt the same process for interviewing and screening potential job candidates that fire and police departments use on a daily basis.

There are many reasons for using these techniques, but perhaps the best one is that they have been tried and proven successful over a long period of time. These particular selection methods seek out candidates with many of the same traits and qualities that the construction industry requires, including:

- Independent judgment

- Effective communication skills
- Teamwork
- Problem-solving abilities
- Focus and goal orientation
- Personal responsibility
- Accountability
- Integrity and ethics
- Resourceful under pressure

The questions asked of candidates during the evaluation process are situational and open-ended, giving the interviewee the opportunity to show what they know and explain how they would solve problems and get along with other members of a team. Firefighters and police officers, like construction workers, sometimes find themselves in situations where life-or-death decisions must be made. Teamwork is paramount, not optional. And for firefighters especially, the requirement to live together cooperatively makes a candidate's personal-ity just as important as his skill set.

A modified version of these proven selection processes should be implemented in every apprenticeship program in the United

States and Canada. Old-school methods get old-school results. We should stop celebrating the "great traditions" of our industry if they don't help us move ahead. Let's get very serious about selection and screening. A high-performance, high-value culture like union construction demands nothing less. The raw material we start with will determine how we finish.

For a free download of sample questions from fire personnel and law enforcement interviews, go to www.breslin.biz. ■

Mark Breslin is a strategist and author who focuses on improving organizational performance, leadership and work ethic. Known for his blunt and uncompromising style, he has addressed more than 500 audiences and well over 200,000 leaders, managers and craft workers. He is the author of *Survival of the Fittest*, *Million Dollar Blue Collar*, and *Alpha Dog: Leading, Managing & Motivating in the Construction Industry*.

