

# Whatever it takes

by MARK BRESLIN

**WHEN I WAS** growing up, our family was under significant financial pressure. Not to belabor the circumstances, but the electricity got turned off, our church paid our bills and school expenses, and I was expected to start contributing at the ripe old age of 11. Working and paying my way from middle school through college was a crucible in which I was formed.

For those of us raised in a traditionally minded household, a strong work ethic was a simple expectation — and with any shortage of resources, a necessity. Upon reflection, these experiences provided me with a reservoir of determination and willpower that has served me all my life. The humility I learned and the ambition that drove me while delivering papers, cleaning houses, pumping gas, cooking fast-food burgers, busing tables and pounding nails have left their imprint on me in profound ways.

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Today, however, the philosophy of “Work hard, get ahead, keep your mouth shut and head down” is increasingly rare among the younger craft members of our industry. In the past, contractors and union members

who grew up with that mindset were more than willing to train entry-level apprentices, most of whom shared the same attitude; the goal was to transfer the skills of one generation to the next, and that was that. But today, our focus has to change. In addition to on-the-job training, we also have to instill in younger workers the attitudes and work ethic that Baby Boomers like me obtained through life experience and took for granted. Simply put, we have to develop the *person* as well as his skill set.

More than 75 million Americans in their 20s and early 30s, known as “Generation Y,” will soon be entering the workforce. Like it or not, they are the primary source for new talent in our industry during the next decade. Generation Y brings significant skill sets in technology, teamwork and collaboration. In terms of I.Q., they are the smartest generation ever. On the other hand, they frequently lack the experiences and context to build the work ethic and “fire in the belly” necessary for a successful career in our industry. “Whatever it takes” is often a credo beyond their current belief systems.

To simply ignore this problem or complain about it is a passive response to a serious challenge. To underestimate this generation’s potential would be foolish — but to not develop it strategically could be fatal. Think about it: For each retiring skilled Boomer with 25 years of field experience, a Gen Y rookie will soon stand in his place ... at the same union wage and fringe benefit compensation rate. We can’t ignore reality.

To help this new generation succeed in union construction, I would like to make three suggestions to contractors and labor training leaders that will significantly impact future



performance of individuals and our industry as a whole.

**1. Refine selection procedures through assessment, interviews and testing.** A large talent pool does not ensure quality. Best practices in our industry should reflect that of other organizations that carefully evaluate and sift their talent pipeline. (See my column in the Spring 2011 issue, as well as sample police and fire department interview protocols at [www.breslin.biz](http://www.breslin.biz).)

Assessments for career potential are becoming standardized in many industries. Connections, personality or luck can no longer be the front door keys to union construction.

**2. Focus on development of key non-technical skills and knowledge.** Apprentices need vital coaching in areas as basic as communication, productivity, money management, construction costs and other elements of "Construction Business 101." In order to fire up their ambition, they also need to understand their career path potential.

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**3. Contractors need to utilize every means available to facilitate knowledge transfer.** It is still very common

for senior members of crews or companies to refuse to help develop younger talent for fear it will jeopardize their own job security. Every time this occurs, our industry suffers an invisible setback that we will pay for in the future. Cross-generational collaboration is very important. Contractors must become aggressively involved in mentoring programs and foreman training that emphasizes talent development as a critical component of the supervisor's role.

In service of these objectives, I have spent several years developing apprentice materials, training programs and contractor talent development plans. Still, I feel I have barely scratched the surface. The challenge is not one of resources — we have all the tools we need to begin training up a new generation. The problem is an inherent resistance among people my own age — the idea that "The old ways are the best ways," and "If X or Y was good enough for me, why not for them?" But to be honest, if I had the opportunity to give young people entering our industry even a small taste of


the hardships I once faced, I would have to think long and hard before doing so. There is no replacement for the mandatory self-reliance of a previous generation. We can't make them go through the same school of hard knocks that we went through, because guess what? That school no longer exists — we're living in 2011 now. But collectively, I believe we have the vision and desire to shape the work ethic of this generation in a different way. We can use a new set of tools to instill in young workers the old traditions of embracing their potential and, yes, doing "whatever it takes" to get the job done.

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