

what's working

building a positive
jobsite culture



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by | **Kathy Bergstrom, CEBS**

When Michael Hawes became training director at the Pacific Northwest Carpenters Institute (PNCI) in Portland, Oregon in 2016, he quickly realized that one aspect of apprenticeship hadn't changed much since he started out in the trades in the 1980s.

Apprentices still faced a certain level of harassment, hazing or other unprofessional behavior on the jobsite. The realization came as Hawes began working with PNCI instructors on strategies for building positive connections and trust with apprentices.

"Our apprentices really started to open up and talk to the instructors about some of the conversations that were taking place on the jobsite," he said. "I was like, 'Man, this is the same kind of stuff I struggled with at times 30 years ago.'"

Collectively, the PNCI team knew it was time to address jobsite culture. A diverse working group was formed to start mapping out a training program. Over 14 months, the group met on a regular basis to develop the two-hour course called Positive Jobsite Culture (PJC).

PNCI trains and mentors 1,400 apprentices who work in Oregon, southwest Washington and Idaho. In addition, the institute runs the continuing education programs, which serve 5,600 active members of the Pacific Northwest Carpenters Union and 500 union contractors.

The Problem

Jobsite culture had never really been formally addressed in the past, and there was a lack of understanding or awareness of communication styles and how interactions could negatively impact the workplace, Hawes explained. "The trades need an engaged workforce, and if negativity, harassment, racism and bullying are not addressed, it diminishes safety and productivity," he said.

In addition, many journeymen were treated the same way when they were apprentices and believed it was a necessary part of the learning experience, like paying your dues.

There was never any conversation about respect in the workplace. "It was somewhat ingrained that these behaviors were acceptable. I think that we live in a different time now, where we have people who expect that they should be respected and valued as team members," Hawes noted.

The need to address the problem seemed especially urgent as the trades face a shortage of skilled workers and look to train a new generation of workers to replace the Baby Boomers who are retiring.

The PJC training is an extension of PNCI's mission statement and core values, which include a commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). "We need to do a better job of recruiting and retaining women and people of color across all our trades. A professional jobsite culture that is supportive and inclusive is the key to highly functioning teams and impacts employee retention," Hawes said.

As part of the training, the PJC illustrates that from 2006 through 2016, 1,150 apprentices completed training to become journeymen through PNCI. However, during that same time period, 1,419 apprentices were terminated. In fact, when Hawes brings up those numbers during training, journeymen have guessed that up to half of apprentices leave because of the culture. "They know that this has been a blind spot for us for a long time, and they want to fix it too," he explained, adding that apprenticeship programs across the nation average a 50% dropout rate in the first year.

"We really wanted to see if we could make some serious changes in the culture and on the

jobsite to make sure that our apprentices are working in an environment that's professional. I think we all have this expectation that no matter what our line of work is, we want an environment that's professional and supportive," Hawes said. "The reality is if we lose our recruits because of the culture and not necessarily the nature of the work, then that is a very negative thing for us because every one of them has a story that they take with them out into their communities."

Education Brings About Change

PNCI created a steering committee to develop the PJC course. The committee included Hawes, PNCI staff and representatives from the Northwest Carpenters Union staff; Worksystems Inc., a Portland nonprofit that specializes in workforce development; and the Oregon Bureau of Labor & Industries.

In the fall of 2017, the committee conducted a pilot training session with about 40 forepersons at the training center. The group's positive reaction confirmed they had hit on something worthwhile. PNCI finalized the PJC course and began offering it in the first quarter of 2018.

The course teaches about unconscious bias and how it can affect relationships with co-workers, shows the impact that bullying and hazing have on workers, and provides tools for how to react to unprofessional conduct. Designed to reach participants on both an intellectual and an emotional level,



Since launching its Positive Jobsite Culture course, the Pacific Northwest Carpenters Institute has conducted close to 165 training sessions for more than 4,900 craft workers. The course is often taught at construction jobsites.

the course encourages individuals, through small group discussions, to examine their own behavior and consider how it might affect others.

Through videos and instruction, the course touches on conflict resolution and effective communication. The importance of bystander intervention is discussed—stressing how it's vital for those who witness or experience bullying to tell someone rather than letting it slide.

The materials include several videos produced by WorkSafe BC, which is a provincial safety agency in British Columbia, Canada.

Instead of labeling the course as “antiharassment” or “sensitivity” training, PNCI stresses the benefits of making jobsites more productive and safe

as well as empowering leaders to build high-functioning teams. That helps to make the training less threatening and more attractive to those who might scoff at the need.

In reality, worksites *are* more productive and safe if people feel they can do their best work, Hawes said.

Since launching the course, PNCI has conducted close to 165 training sessions for more than 4,900 craft workers. Many of the sessions are conducted on jobsites and in contractors' offices and are presented to apprentices, journeyworkers and supervisors. “Everybody gets the same message at the same time,” Hawes emphasized.

The fact that the training is conducted on the jobsite during workhours sends the message that the contractor

takes it seriously, he said. And while the course “checks the box” for harassment training required by the U.S. Department of Labor, he contends that contractors are looking to do more than satisfy a regulatory requirement.

Impact

PNCI hasn't measured the effect on apprentice recruitment or retention, but the training center has received a lot of positive feedback from contractors and tradespeople. Informal surveys of apprentices have shown a marked improvement in the number who say that their jobsites are professional and that they feel supported.

Hawes credits a big part of the program's success to the number of contractors who have embraced the training. Multiple contractors have invited Hawes to the jobsite for a variety of reasons to hold the training. “Having the support of senior leadership is the key to changing culture,” he said. The Northwest Carpenters Union has also been supportive, providing meals for program participants. “It takes a team approach to set up and deliver a successful class,” Hawes noted.

One of the contractors that supports PJC is Fred Shearer & Sons, Inc., a Tigard, Oregon-based specialty contractor. Co-owner John Park said company officials have been pro-

ponents of the training since they first became aware of it. Park serves on the joint apprenticeship and training committee (JATC) that governs the PNCI.

“One of the things that we've been doing for quite a few years in our company is setting the groundwork for expectations on how we treat each other. We're here to support each other,” Park said.

When they learned about the PNCI course, they decided that it fit in well with the company's philosophy.

The company first offered the PNCI course to employees in 2018 and plans to continue offering it every other year. “We'll go to every major jobsite, and our goal is to have everybody who's working for us go through the training,” he said.

Hawes does a good job of placing class participants into small groups so they can have productive discussions on culture, and workers have responded favorably, Park said.

Focusing on culture is one of the ways company owners plan to keep the 105-year-old contractor in business for another 100 years. He believes that emphasis on culture should result in higher productivity, better retention and great success for the business. “Ultimately, if our team members are coming to work, and they're happy and they feel like a part of the team, I think the rest will take care of itself.”

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