

Supervisor Training Program

A man in his mid-thirties sits in front of a TV screen with the late afternoon sun shining through the room's west window. On the screen, he is watching problems unfold as two intense employees of the Danier Construction Co. become involved in a heated discussion. Our observer is an unlikely fan of the afternoon soaps in his dusty jeans and the imprint of a hardhat sweatband still on his forehead. Then the program is interrupted, not by a commercial, but by a series of questions and answers. Questions such as, "Should Jack wait for the mechanic to arrive or should he reschedule the pour?" test his understanding of the video segment.

It is not "As the World Turns"; it is one of the offerings of the Merit Supervisor Training Program. Likely as not, the user is a foreman who has come straight from a construction site to round off his workday with a session on the interactive video unit located in the offices of Merit Contractors Association. The TV screen is connected to a computer and to a video disk drive. As the course material plays on the screen, the student uses a mouse to respond to questions.

That this technological wizardry is part of a construction-related training program should not surprise us. Sometimes considered an essentially conservative industry, construction is nonetheless steadily integrating sophisticated software and technical innovations into its everyday operations. Designers of the Supervisor Training Program realized that its effectiveness would be enhanced by an interactive video module; thus, it became a program component.

How times change

Just ten years ago, there was nothing like this program in the construction industry. Workers could learn technical skills through the apprenticeship program, but moving up through the ranks was a haphazard process. Generally, a skilled and able worker was made lead hand on a crew and then, if an opportunity opened up, promoted to foreman then superintendent. Some lip service was given to the idea that productive carpenters should not step into a supervisor's shoes on the strength of their formwork or the speed at which they could hang doors, but generally, technical skill was the foundation for their new responsibilities. It was up to some outside body to recognize the deficiencies that resulted and determine how to remedy them.

That task was taken up by the fledgling Merit Contractors Association. In 1987, Merit brought together professionals from the construction and training industries to work through what people need to know and do in order to supervise employees on a construction site, to decide how to pass along that information to people who are unaccustomed to the classroom, and to do it all within an affordable price. While Merit represented contractors in the open shop sector, it recognized that a course of this type would be invaluable to the entire construction industry as long as it was customized as required. After almost a year of information gathering, writing and revising course materials, and recruiting capable instructors, the first course was offered to the public in the fall of 1988.

Today, as then, the program focuses on the skills most often missing from a newly-promoted supervisor's array of abilities: people skills (effective communicating, performance evaluation, hiring and terminating, training) and the "soft" skills of construction (scheduling, time management, quality control, safety). Managers from any industry will recognize the topics because, of course, the essentials of competent supervision do not vary greatly. What differs is that in this training program, the examples and materials are

taken from construction making it simpler for students to move from theory to practice. That difference is significant for people whose entire work history has been within the hands-on field of construction.

Flexible delivery

As important as course content is the mode of delivery. A strength of Merit's program is how easily the method can be adapted to various settings. The normal mode of delivery is the classroom, but rather than a traditional lecture hall style, students are seated in an arrangement conducive to interaction. The instructors are as much facilitators as teachers, presenting a situation or the material and then drawing students into discussion. Commonly, in the first session, many of those less comfortable with expressing themselves verbally will be hesitant to participate but, within a few sessions, they are eager to add their own experiences to the exchange. Instructors vary their presentations with case studies, role playing, films - whatever is suited to the topic.

The interactive video session mentioned earlier is conducted on an individual basis. Students arrange a convenient time with the local Merit office. While the average completion time might be three hours, students can spend more or less time as suited to their own study method and style. Some may be more thorough, reviewing information until they are satisfied, while others learn more quickly and are able to progress through the material in less time. Objective feedback from self-testing helps students decide when they have grasped the fundamentals.

Along with the fifteen classroom sessions is a second element, on-job training, which is especially significant for construction employees. Most of those registered in the supervisor training program are permanent employees with busy schedules. It may be simple enough for them to set aside an evening each week for the classroom session, but where can they find time to reinforce and practice the lessons learned? The preferred option is in their own work setting, dealing with real problems that they typically encounter. With this unique approach, the students' work supervisors become their tutors and evaluators. For example, using the preset assignment as a guide, students and their supervisors work out the hiring requirements for an upcoming project; the students conduct the interviews and reference checks; then they discuss the results and recommendations with their supervisors. The on-job supervisors note the completed assignment in the students' training "passports" and evaluate the performances with grades and written comments.

An evaluation for each assignment, is necessary to graduate from the program. This requirement is very time-consuming and some students are frustrated by their supervisors' time limitations; but those who complete the program almost all agree that this element of the course is essential.

Taking it to the people From this basic format of fifteen sessions and on-job training, Merit has developed a number of mini-courses to suit special needs. Modifications have been made to suit individual contractors who preferred in-house courses and for associations who wanted the program presented in a different geographical location. As an example of the former case, a roadbuilding contractor in Red Deer selected, with professional help, a half dozen topics relevant to his work and to his employees. The instructor traveled from Edmonton several times over a two-week period meeting with the students in a central location close to the work sites. The skills of about seventy employees were enhanced in this short time span.

Merit has conducted its program in cooperation with a number of other associations over the past few years resulting in enormous benefits at minimal cost. In Alberta, courses have been run in Lethbridge, Red Deer,

Grande Prairie and Fort McMurray, with the help of the local construction associations, who determined their members' needs and promoted the program. In the six years since the Supervisor Training Program was created, over eight hundred students have participated in the courses. What was originally recognition by a handful of Edmonton contractors of a knowledge gap, has developed into an industry standard for training at a national level, a standard that is accepted and recognized by other groups. Construction associations in other provinces such as Independent Contractors and Businesses Association in British Columbia and the Merit Contractors Association Inc. of Saskatchewan (a separate entity from Merit in Alberta) have offered Merit's courses for their members

The program has been updated as required: some instructors have been replaced as class needs changed, although several have been involved since the beginning; a module on safety was added with the help of the Alberta Construction Safety Association; and, of course, interactive video has brought the mode of delivery into the computer age. But the fundamentals have not changed: teaching construction people to become good managers of their co-workers and subordinates, motivating others to perform to the best of their abilities, using time productively. Merit's Supervisory Program is clearly an innovative and proven approach to training supervisors, one which will be around for many more years to come in the construction industry.