



## Laurence Claus

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## WHY FASTENER DISTRIBUTORS SHOULD EMBRACE TRAINING

During a visit home in my junior year of college, I was told a story about something that happened to two brothers I had known from scouting. They were a couple of years younger than me and still in high school at the time. Their father had purchased a car for them with expectations that they were to be responsible for its care and upkeep. In their zeal to prove to their father that he had made a wise investment in their development, they decided to change the oil themselves. So they went out, purchased several quarts of oil, a filter, and proceeded to drain and replace the oil. Reveling in their accomplishment they decided to take a "victory lap" around the block and so hopped in the car and took off. They had only gone a short distance when the car began to make funny noises, quickly followed by an explosion as their engine gave its last. They couldn't "believe" what had just happened, they had done everything they had received guidance to do. They had drained the old oil, put in the new oil, replaced the filter, and the drain plug. How could things have gone so very wrong?

As they would later find out, it doesn't help to fill the radiator with oil. They had mistaken the radiator cap to be the filling location for the crankcase and had filled the radiator with several quarts of oil. In retrospect they realized that a little bit of training and experienced guidance would have prevented a costly mistake.

In the same way, we often introduce individuals into our businesses with nothing more than a rudimentary initiation into their new job. The further down into the organization one goes, generally, the less training or job preparation an individual receives. In fact, many operators receive little more instruction than a basic

safety talk, directions to the cafeteria, and the expected times for them to show up and take breaks. Although modern quality system standards such as ISO 9000 require it, I know of no organization that does a satisfactory job acclimating "temporary" workers to the jobs they are brought in to do for a short time. In fact, it is probably remarkable that more institutions don't actually experience major calamities at the hands of individuals that have only a short tenure with the organization.

However, one doesn't have to be "new" to a company to make a grievous error due to lack of training. People perform jobs all the time with a limited or incomplete understanding of them. Take for example the recent Asiana Airlines Flight 214 crash landing in San Francisco. In this case, the pilots were guiding their Boeing 777 aircraft in for a landing when

the plane dipped below safe landing speed and clipped the landing gear and tail section on a seawall at the end of the runway, resulting in a disastrous "belly flop" and subsequent crash landing. This accident cost three passengers their lives and countless others were injured. Although the root causes have not been definitively established, early speculation revolved around pilot error contributing to this accident. The three pilots in the cockpit at the time of the accident were all well respected and veterans of Asiana Airlines. However, the pilot in the left seat (Captain's position) had only 43 hours of experience in the 777 and had never landed in San Francisco with this plane. The right seat pilot (Co-pilot position) was occupied by a company instructor with 3220 hours of time in a 777, but on his first flight ever as an instructor.



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Could more training and experience have prevented this accident? Naturally, it is impossible to say with certainty, but, likely, if this accident is determined to be partially or fully caused by pilot error, then it is equally likely that it was fully preventable had there been more training and opportunity for the pilots to gain experience.

Training and employee development, therefore, can have far reaching advantages for both the organization and the individual. Unfortunately, many organizations ignore these advantages and simply do not invest sufficient time and effort into training and development. These activities are simply not part of their "culture". This article shall look at several considerations related to training and attempt to paint a picture for why every organization should embrace training and employee development not as simply a "good idea" but rather as an essential key to their survival.

### *It Is Strategic:*

Perhaps the most compelling reason is that employee development is truly strategic in nature. Understanding what activities make an organization unique and discern it from others plays a big role in strategy development. Once these activities are identified, training is one of the best ways of instilling these activities into the very cultural fiber of the company. Take for example the Ritz Carlton chain of hotels. Their strategy is to provide mystique in an unsurpassed and unforgettable customer experience. They accomplish this by weaving together a set of customer centric activities and empowering their associates to fulfill them. Anyone that has ever had the opportunity to spend a night in one of these hotels can probably attest to how very different the experience is from other hotel stays they may have experienced. Much of what the Ritz Carlton does, when viewed in pieces is not particularly unique. When woven together and relentlessly reinforced with training and activities that encourage empowerment and team building, a unique and very difficult model to copy is achieved. As a result they have a competitive (or strategic) advantage and a staff that is completely aligned with the goals of the organization. In this way, training proves to be very

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strategic to the Ritz Carlton organization and, in a similar fashion, can be to any organization.

### *It Prevents Problems*

There is a scene in the movie *Apollo 13* where the character of Jack Swigert, played by Kevin Bacon, tapes a note over a switch in the crippled Command Module urging no one to touch it. Jim Lovell's character, played by Tom Hanks, asks about this and is told this is the switch that jettisons the Lunar Module, where all the astronauts have been holed up during the final days of the aborted mission. Kevin Bacon explains that he was operating at less than 100% and did not, even by accident, want to separate the two modules until all three astronauts were safely ensconced back into the Command Module ready for reentry.

It is in our nature to have similar fears about pressing that one button or computer key that will spell immediate disaster. Although it is not always bad to be cautious, proper training and education can help dispel some of those fears and eliminate potential problems.

Take for example the illustration at the outset of this article about the two boys changing the oil in their car. If they had been trained in two simple areas, either one would have saved their engine. If they had been informed about the different filling spots on an engine they clearly would not have mistaken the radiator fill pipe for the crankcase fill pipe. Likewise, if they had been taught about the presence and use of the oil dipstick, they would have realized that the crankcase had no oil in it and been able to make corrections before driving away.

In the same way, simple fastener education can pay significant dividends to the fastener distributor and manufacturer alike. All too often one of the complaints waged by customers against a company's service individuals is that they only know part numbers. Although this can be extremely helpful, it is also a liability if they are unable to answer simple product related questions or recognize a potential problem order. Frequently orders are fulfilled that do not satisfy a customer's needs because the customer was too ignorant to know what to ask for and the supplier was too ill informed to truly help.

## *Improved Productivity*

Many individuals in my parents' generation struggle with new technology. Take for example cell phones. It took my father probably ten years after the popularization of cell phones to actually get one. Although now that he has one, he seldom uses it and when he does, it is only to make phone calls. I have never asked but I would venture a guess that he does not know how to use the texting features and camera that are available on his phone let alone the "Apps" that would allow him to connect with his "friends", view a video, or deposit a check without driving to the bank. Likewise, I think it is a common tendency for most everyone to utilize only a fraction of the functionality of many of their modern conveniences. This may be because they don't really need those unused functions, but often it is because they are intimidated and don't take the time to learn how to use them. Imagine how enlightening and productivity enhancing getting educated in these matters can be. It may be readily apparent regarding personal items like a SMART phone or DVR, but translate that to training in the office. Whether it is knowledge based training like a Fastener Basics course or functional training like learning the features of a work based computer software program, there is little dispute that vocational training begets more educated and productive associates.

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## *Improved Customer Service*

Take a moment to reflect on several of the more frustrating customer service exchanges you have experienced. Likely, several common themes come to mind, such as not being able to understand the individual you are seeking help from (a common complaint of individuals transferred to overseas service centers), not being "heard" by your help giver, not being able to reach an actual person, and perhaps the most frustrating of all, reaching someone and discovering they do not possess enough knowledge or

empowerment to actually solve your problem. Although empowerment is entirely another cultural issue, knowledge is a problem that can usually be solved with education and training. Wouldn't it be nice to have the reputation of being "the" industry's knowledge leader?

Can you imagine a day when customers specifically seek your company out because they know that they can speak with a knowledgeable individual that will assist them in solving their current fastener related problem? One of the ways to achieve this is to invest and reinvest in the training, development, and knowledge of those associates who most commonly interact with your customers.

## *Retention*

A new challenge that will be faced by companies in the coming years is the transition of older employees leaving the workforce and youth coming of age and entering the workforce. Like society as a whole, no individual company can survive without this right of passage. However, the Millennial Generation (one now entering the workforce) has some fundamentally different views on career and the workplace than their predecessors, the Baby Boomers and X Generation. One of these differences is their seeming openness to change. As a generation, they are much more willing to make career changes or flip companies than their older X Generation and Baby Boomer colleagues are. Therefore, retention will become an increasingly important topic because it is simply too expensive and disruptive to an organization to have constant changeover.

One proven method for retaining individuals, especially Millennials, is to invest in them through training. Interestingly, this need not be directly related to their existing job function. In fact, it may have a greater impact to not be directly job function specific. For example taking an engineer and giving them some training in financial acumen may be extremely interesting to that individual and signal to them the company's personal interest and investment in them and their careers. Training is a fantastic retention method, assuming that it is done intentionally and with a mutual end goal for the company and individual.

## *Practical Matters*

As discussed earlier, training should be strategic. This means it must include the entire organization from the CEO down to the lowest ranked associate. Too many organizations focus only on a small segment of their business, for example engineers or sales, at the exclusion of everyone else. In other cases, the managers, supervisors, and long-tenured individuals are always “too busy” to be included. Everybody in an organization has a part to play and everybody needs continued training and retraining.

In addition to conducting technical and functional training, your organization should identify places where “soft skills” training would be beneficial. These are skills like customer service, supervision, negotiation, project or time management, and problem solving. Often these are the subjects that are most beneficial to individuals, especially those that comprise your “technical team”, and interestingly, most appreciated.

Currently there are several excellent general training courses that are fastener focused. These generally teach basic topics such as how to use standards, terminology, bolted joint technology, basic fastener materials, and other essential fastener related topics. Although these do an excellent job, they are not customized to a company’s

specific needs. Additionally, most companies are unable to send more than a couple of key players to these courses. Although these “realities” should not deter a company from sending associates outside for training, most of the training organizations also offer customized, in-house training. This may be worth consideration if there are specific areas you desire your entire team to know better. It will also allow you to expose more individuals to the material and in a more comprehensive and cost effective manner.

## *Summary*

I have encountered many organizations over the years. Although I have known organizations that seem to be training all the time without any outward signs of effectiveness, and far more that almost completely ignore formal training, most organizations that strike the right balance find it an extremely effectual and high dividend producing activity. It must be done intentionally. Training just to show an activity or to be able to “check a box” on some auditor’s form is of little or no value. However, when done with clear goals in mind, training can be an extremely significant activity for any organization and one that should be embraced with some level of enthusiasm and import as other activities which shape and mold the identity of the company. 