

Oak Ridge Centers for Manufacturing Technology — The Manufacturing Skills Campus

Another of the inputs came from Garry Whitley, President of the Atomic Trades and Labor Council, since retired. Garry and I have worked together years, and I am happy to say have been able to contribute to harmony between labor and management over the years. I well recall Garry's support of a number of initiatives we agreed upon while Associate Director of the Facilities Management Organization.

We succeeded in building a number of self-directed work teams that improved productivity. One of the best was the Inspection Support Team. Garry and the rest of the electricians who were supporting inspection machines in a number of buildings initiated the idea of working without a supervisor and just taking the work directly from the operating supervisors. They devised a method to establish work priorities, collect time and assign work that was quite effective. It allowed me to assign a couple of supervisors to other specialized projects and pleased the operating organizations.

Another thing we saw was an improved safety record resulting from the creation of what was known as the ATLC/FMO Partnership. Garry was a leader in that effort as well. We also had a Safety Work Action Team that was self-directed.

Over the years, our working relationship grew more and more trusting until we could predict what each other would do or say on any given subject. I enjoyed working with Garry and several others who also supported the partnership effort.

I can't leave this thought without mentioning the Oak Ridge Labor Management Prayer Breakfast, now in its 14th year of highly successful programs held annually on the first Thursday of December. Garry has supported that effort faithfully, as well as several others, through the years.

I asked him if he would write his recollections of the Manufacturing Skills Campus, which was a well-respected part of the Oak Ridge Centers for Manufacturing Technology. He readily agreed. Here is Garry's input:

"In 1990 Y-12 was facing a reduction in force because of funding. Rather than lose all the employees with the needed skills to machine weapons parts, the decision was made to start an apprentice program and retrain employees to work in other fields.

"Fifty-plus employees, mostly machinist, were selected and placed in an accelerated apprentice program, a program which gave them credit for their existing skills. As this program ended in 1993 and these apprentices became journeymen, the need arose to retrain our current craftsmen because of technology changes in almost every field.

"The Manufacturing Skills Campus was created and courses were developed to enhance skills of the workforce. This was very successful, so successful that outside companies heard of the training and requested their employees get in the classes.

"This was a first for Y-12. First, for hourly employees who taught the classes to become certified trainers and second for workers from outside Y-12 to come here for training. What I remember most was that the philosophy changed and rather than say 'we could not do something,' the question was asked 'why we could not do it.'

“This turned into hourly employees going out in the businesses in east Tennessee and recruiting. We recruited employees for our training courses and also helped local businesses solve problems. It was a first for research and technology developed at Y-12 to be used to help businesses.

“This was called Work for Others. This program worked great until the funding ended because of budget cuts.

“In my 40-plus years at Y-12, this was one of the most successful programs because it kept the current worker skills up to date and helped businesses across the country solve their problems and thus become more competitive. Our question to businesses was, ‘What can we do to help you?’

“If they had a problem, we came back to Y-12 and looked for a subject matter expert in the area of the problem. In every instance, there was someone here who helped solve the problem.”

Garry recalls the success of the Manufacturing Skills Campus and ORCMT in almost the same breath. They were that interrelated. The hourly workforce who worked in this environment excelled beyond what they would have done in a less encouraging environment. The change in attitude from why we can't do something to how can we do it effectively made all the difference.

Without fail, every hourly person I have asked about their experience working with the ORCMT team has responded that it was a highlight of their career, primarily because of the way leadership there included them and allowed them to be fully integrated into the team effort.

As we are now again elevating the importance of our Work for Others efforts, we would do well to recall some of the reasons ORCMT was highly successful, such as the way all members of the various teams were included in all aspects of the program. Creativity flourishes in such environments.

People reach well beyond their normal productivity levels and synergy results. High Performance Work Teams is a name applied to this approach by Organizational Development professionals. We just did it, we did not name it!