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The majority of you reading this column are professionals in every sense of the word. You've probably spent an initial 6000 to 8000 hours in attaining an accredited trade, technical diploma or degree, along with countless hours in additional training programs. Many of you are in, or fast approaching, your fifth decade of life, and having spent an average of 2000 work hours for every year worked will have amassed anywhere from 65,000 to 80,000+ hours of "hands-on" maintenance experience.

Over the course of those many hours, you've likely encountered every conceivable type of maintenance failure and repair issue. Some were memorable, others forgettable; all were learning experiences waiting to be shared and "passed on." The travesty of the current skilled-trades crisis is that millions of precious maintenance experience hours are being bled out of industry annually as more and more of you retire (or get ready to over the next 5-10 years)—*with little or no succession planning in the works!*

Too many school systems have forsaken "hands-on" vocational training by closing home economics and shop classes, for example. Couple that with a lack of formal apprenticeship programs and you begin to see why it is so difficult for a child to understand the value of being able to make something from nothing or bring something back to its original state and make it useful again. This situation has helped create a real void of talent that could be stepping up to alleviate our current skilled-trades dilemma.

Now is the time to act! If we wait for government to do so, it will be too little, too late, if at all! As maintenance pros, YOU have a legacy to protect and a massive amount of skills and knowledge to share with the next generation. Only with YOUR help and creativity can we stave off an impending catastrophe. It's time to set up a partnership with America's youth and allow them to know the "rush" and rewards from engineering or building something from scratch or repairing something that was about to be discarded forever.

"Pass it on" strategies

To ensure that YOUR experience is not wasted, YOU must find a way to "pass it on" to the workforce of tomorrow. By now, most of you are well aware of the television series Made in America, conceived, produced and hosted by John Ratzenberger (aka Cliff Clavin, the amiable postman from the wildly popular *Cheers* series).

In *Made in America*, he put the spotlight on American manufacturing facilities and the pride their employees took in turning out products.

You also probably know by now that Ratzenberger is a strong advocate for the skilled trades and the pursuance of "hands-on" vocational training through his role as founder and spokesperson for the Nuts, Bolts & Thingamajigs (NBT) Foundation, which he established with the Fabricators and Manufacturers Association. NBT provides young people an outlet for serious tinkering through summer manufacturing camps and awards of scholarships for deserving students to pursue technical interests at trade schools and colleges. Through their unselfish actions, Ratzenberger and NBT have given hundreds of kids the opportunity to act out their innovative side through the simple act of making stuff at a summer camp.

In the past, the tinkering rights of passage typically involved gifting a youngster with a tool kit, a miniature version of the real thing—*not a plastic simulator like most of today's tool kit offerings*
—
or mechanical toys and building sets that came with real nuts and bolts and mini-wrenches. These types of products are still available. Giving them to your small children or grandchildren (or those of others) and supervising their use is a great way to pass on your knowledge and skills at a true grassroots level.

Older kids require a different approach. With them, you'll want to seek out opportunities to demonstrate the value of critical thinking and how to model a design or repair in their heads by working with them to restore an old car, build a deck or renovate a room. Even if they don't go on to work in a trade, you will have fostered a thought process that encourages them to think about others and how their decisions affect processes and people. How many times have we all wished for that? It starts with YOU, one tinkerer at a time. Believe me, there are countless ways you can "pass it on" to America's youth. Here are some ideas to get the ball rolling:

- If your operations have apprentices, take time to mentor them. Don't wait until the end of an apprenticeship to reveal the "secrets" of the trade.
- Offer your mentoring services to your local college and trade-school technical programs. Even a simple question-and-answer session on machine failure can provide tremendous value for the students.
- Campaign at high schools for shop classes, or volunteer to speak to a graduating class on the rewards of a vocational "hands-on" career.
- Help your company promote its own "Made in America" type of showcase. Invite local school children and show them the complexity (and excitement) involved in making and repairing things at your facility.
- Encourage your company to set up a day of job "shadowing" for local high school

students.

- Hold a fund-raiser, or persuade your company to sponsor an NBT Summer Camp. For more details visit www.nutsandboltsfoundation.org.
- Invite school administrators into your business to show the value of a "hands-on" vocation.

- Work with local media outlets to show them why the designation "Made in America" means so much—i.e. products made in America with pride, not made halfway around the world under suspect circumstances.
- Become a Big Brother or Sister for a youngster, and work together on a restoration project.

Whatever strategy you choose, recognize the value of YOUR contribution to your company, your profession and the public at large through the product or service you deliver. Above all, be proud of what you do and share that pride. I challenge all "tinkerers" to unite and create a "Pass It On!" wave for our youth over the next five years. I guarantee you will receive much more than you will give. Good luck! **MT**

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