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CAREER ADVANCEMENT PROGRAM COMBINES CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION, MENTORSHIP AND HANDS-ON TRAINING

By CARLY HORTON STUART

Managing a construction job is no small task. It requires in-depth knowledge of the industry, excellent communication and interpersonal skills, strategic thinking and budget management skills. Good superintendents aren't born, but thankfully — with the right education, training and mentorship — they can be made.

According to the United Brotherhood of Carpenters (UBC), the concept for superintendent training is to closely integrate both the technical aspects of construction jobsite management and the personal and career development needs of the individual trainee. The training itself encompasses classroom instruction,

company-sponsored mentoring and on-the-job training.

The Carpenters International Training Fund (CITF) — which, along with its affiliated training programs, invests more than \$200 million annually to develop and deliver training for UBC members — administers an 18-month program that turns out highly skilled construction industry professionals. Its Superintendent Career Training (SCT) program equips graduates with the skills needed to oversee and manage productive work sites, adhere to project timelines and stay within allocated budgets.

Bill Irwin, executive director of the Carpenters International Training Fund, said the idea behind SCT came

about because many superintendents coming out of college and university training programs lacked on-the-job training.

A carpenter since he was 10 years old, Irwin is no stranger to the construction industry. After leaving college, he completed a four-year apprenticeship training program and worked in the field from 1971 until 1987, at which time he became the director of the Boston Carpenters Apprenticeship Program. In 1997 Irwin accepted the director position with the New England Carpenters Training Fund, and in 2003 he was named executive director of the Carpenters International Training Fund.

The SCT curriculum covers technical aspects of construction, management strategies and policy issues, computer applications, superintendent roles and responsibilities, planning and productivity, and communication and leadership. Theory and classroom work takes place at the



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The Las Vegas-based Carpenters International Training Center serves as the hub through which the UBC and its working members can rapidly deliver in-demand skills into the field.

training center, and mentor sessions and on-the-job learning occur at work sites throughout North America.

One of the steps in its curriculum-development process included the UBC working with FMI, a consulting firm dedicated exclusively to the engineering and construction industry, to measure areas the construction industry is involved with, such as interior systems and concrete work.

"What we found," Irwin said, "is that you can give someone all the productivity skills in the world, but that's only 50 percent of the equation. In the mid-1980s, we started seeing a shift. Before then, supervisors tended to move up through the ranks, from carpenter to superintendent. But it takes more than books and classes to learn to be a superintendent — you need hands-on learning."

UBC went to eight colleges and universities and spoke with the professors of their construction management programs. "These professors had been superintendents in the field before they matriculated into their respective universities. They not only helped put together the SCT program, but they teach it too," Irwin said.

Responsible for field supervision and all on-site administrative and technical management of a project, superintendents must possess thorough knowledge of all aspects of construction.

"These people aren't a dime a dozen," Irwin said. "To be in a supervisory position, you have to have a

brain, work well with others and be able to think on your feet." While experienced superintendents have always been in short supply, the dearth was exacerbated by what Irwin calls "the perfect storm."

"First, the baby boomers (born 1946-1964) are retiring. Generation X (born 1961-1981) is a substantially smaller group, so we don't have

enough workers to replace them. Second, during the 2008 recession — really, it hit the construction industry in 2007, and for us, it was a depression. A lot of folks were forced out of the trade because of a lack of work."

Thankfully, for the past 13 years, SCT has been churning out graduates to help meet the demand, nearly 1,000 to date.

Based in Las Vegas, the Carpenters International Training Center encompasses 1.2 million square feet and contains 320 dorm rooms. According to UBC, it supports the creation of new courses that meet contractors' evolving needs such as interior systems, scaffolding, concrete formwork, commercial doors and hardware, and gas- and steam-turbine installation and maintenance.

The center also hosts direct member training in power-generation and other special crafts as well as industry conferences and an array of development programs that teach skills like leadership, productivity, project management and communication.

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The training itself is “really in-depth and company-oriented,” Irwin said. Trainees are company selected and sponsored. Contractors pay trainees’ wages while they attend training sessions, and CITF pays for rooms, meals, registration fees, associated class costs and airfare. A trainee must be a Journeyman member in good standing with the UBC.

During the 18-month program, trainees work with a company-selected mentor almost daily for one-on-one interaction, discussion and instruction on a selected topic focused on the company’s specific approach, strategy, policies and procedures.

Mentors plan, coordinate and assure the trainee receives meaningful experience in the selected areas. Through mentorship, contractors are presented the opportunity to transfer knowledge of the company’s policies and standard operational

procedures to the new superintendent. CITF covers the cost of airfare, rooms, meals, registration fees and associated class costs for mentors.

George Tuckness, senior project manager with Neeser Construction Inc., said that as contractors develop their on-site leaders, “We want (them) to have the best communication skills, computer skills and knowledge of government regulations and safety.

Old-fashioned methods of on-the-job training are proving to be inefficient for today’s project requirements. Most supervisors have great work ethics and are highly skilled in their trade, but when it comes to formal training, it’s difficult to find enough time or resources (to train them).”

Neeser sent one employee to the Carpenters International Training Center, “and we plan to send others for this excellent training,” Tuckness said. “It would be quite expensive to

send employees to this school — and probably worth every penny — but at this time UBC is providing it free to qualified members. We are finding that the trades unions are recognizing they increase their market value by providing this specialized training, and contractors recognize this value as good business.”

Kevin Hanley, director for training for the Alaska Regional Council of Carpenters, said that superintendent training programs have really taken off in Alaska. “Trainees learn the different aspects of running work, leadership and productivity.”

However, with construction spending projected to decline 18 percent in 2016 according to a report released early this year by the University of Alaska Anchorage’s Institute of Social and Economic Research (ISER), one wonders if the demand for superintendents is there.

Hanley said he isn’t worried.

“Some of the work in Alaska is slowing down, but there is over a billion dollars’ worth of work coming in,” Hanley said. “Some of the major projects include proposals for the unmanned aerial vehicle storage hangar and Eielson flight simulator, both in Fairbanks; spending for hospital/clinic projects; and port and harbor projects continue to do well.”

“In June, Gov. Walker restored the 90 percent Alaska resident hire preference for publicly funded infrastructure projects to help Alaska construction workers obtain jobs.

“In 2014, 18 percent of those jobs went to non-residents. Hopefully the governor’s determination will ease the construction slowdown for Alaska workers and the communities in which they live,” Hanley said.

As for the Alaska Regional Council of Carpenters, “We’ve been doing this in Alaska since 1939,” Hanley said. “We survived the recession in the 1980s, and we’ll survive this. We’re still training, we’re still taking apprentices, offering journeyman enhancement classes and helping our contractors any way we can.”

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