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Training for Tenacity

Just as the milieu of the marketplace is constantly changing, so are its vehicles. No longer are models slightly altered every five or so years. This makes it difficult to be prepared to fix any vehicles that come into your shop. Just as soon as you are prepared—or think you are prepared—changes are made again. Your techs need to know these changes.

Michael Anderson, owner of Wagonwork Collision Center in Alexandria, Va., also trains other employees besides his techs. "I even send my office staff to classes on how to resolve conflicts," Anderson says. "We try to send everyone to training that will help them—from our reps to the collision department to the detail department."

But what do you do if you invest money in training your techs, drivers or other personnel and they leave your shop shortly after the training? Does it still make the training worth it?

Do You Lose When They Leave?

Anderson says that even if a tech leaves your company, the

investment is still worth it. He says assuming the philosophy that your techs and other employees are just going to stick around for training and then take off for another employer "is such a bad philosophy." It's not only demotivating, but it shows a lack of trust, he says. And it can breed contempt. "If I don't trust my techs, and they don't trust me, then we shouldn't be working with each other," Anderson says.

But sometimes trust just isn't enough. Deals go bad, businesses close and sometimes people take advantage of others or they lie. Although you may want to give everyone the benefit of the doubt, how do you support training and keep it on the forefront, but ensure that you get what you paid for?

Signing on the Dotted Line

Anderson makes a deal with his techs and other office personnel. And he's also careful to scope out whether that employee really is going to stick around. "We won't send anyone to training when they first start working here," Anderson says. "I say, 'I'd like you to work for me for 90 days to six months before I send you.'" He likens this period of time to a probationary period—a gray period.

Once an employee makes it past this time, Anderson says he is typically more than happy to send him or her to training. He also has started having some employees sign an agreement stating that if they leave his facility within 18 months, they have to pay back the costs of any training/schooling provided during that time frame.

For the most part, this plan has been successful, he says. But as with anything else, there are always the live and learn experiences. Such was the case with one incident in which he supported continuing education.

Anderson is highly involved with vo-tech and other auto-body programs in his local area. He also runs the SkillsUSA-VICA state contest for Virginia and Maryland, which gives him first crack at the best of the best upcoming technicians. Anderson decided to take advantage of this and offer tuition assistance to the winner of the SkillsUSA Virginia contest a few years back.

The autobody student had been accepted to Houston Tech and was planning on continuing his studies there, so Anderson signed an employment agreement with the student-tech. "We signed an agreement that he

would get \$300 a month going to school." In return, he had to work for us for at least 18 months. He was done with the program. However, the plan was that he was free to move on. However, the plan was that the student dropped out of the program at Houston Tech.

In this case, Anderson says, some of his investments haven't soured him. "I haven't soured him on continuing education. It's something we tried, and it didn't work out," he says. "I'd do it again. I just might do the screening a little more carefully. Over time, continuing education is

Does Learning Breed Loyalty?

Three of Anderson's techs who consistently pursue continuing education have the idea of additional job opportunities, saying that it makes them loyal to the bodyshop they work. And it helps them find the good shops from the good shops as well as the good shops from the outstanding shops.

Donald Hughes and Andrew Ford, both of Wagonwork Collision Center, recently attended work at Lincoln Electric. And a few years back, Hughes attended P