

FINDING TOMORROW'S LEADERS

TODAY

The passage last year of both NAFTA and GATT has gone a long way toward leveling the playing field for American manufacturers and others hoping to compete in the global economy. Add to this news the fact that the domestic economy keeps growing, and it seems as though good times are ahead for the gear industry.

Which is not to say our industry still does not have to face some difficult issues. Recently, the president of one of our leading gear machine manufacturing companies put his finger on one of them: Where is the next generation of managerial leadership to come from in our industry?

The executive we spoke with reminisced about the days twenty-five to thirty years ago when he and his counterparts in other gear companies came to work as newly minted engineers, learning the rudiments of the gear business and setting their sights on the managerial track. Now he looks behind him to see who's going to fill his shoes and sees... no one.

This should not be read as arrogance on his part. The fact is that our industry has not done a very good job of recruiting bright young engineers. The ones we have are good, but there simply aren't enough of them. Furthermore, our engineering schools (with a few notable exceptions) haven't done a very good job of training people in gear design and manufacturing. This specialized field gets short shrift in their curricula.

There are a number of reasons for this. Other fields, notably environmental science and computer hardware and software design, appear to be much more exciting, glamorous and potentially lucrative to technically gifted Generation X-ers, and little effort has gone into correcting this mistaken impression. Gearing is also a small piece of the much larger manufacturing industry pie and tends to get overlooked. Cost pressures have forced a number of companies running first-rate, in-house gear training programs to close them down. The decade-long litany that manufacturing as a whole is doomed in the U.S. hasn't helped draw young people to the field either.

But the issue of the scarcity of good people in the leadership pipeline is not one we can overlook.

The gear industry has attempted to address the problem on the shop floor level in a number of ways. Working with local schools (See page 14 of our May/June 1994 issue) is a step in the right direction, but such efforts are few, and much needs to be done to expand these joint ventures.

Engineering the problem out of existence is another approach. One of the forces driving CNC software development is the need to make machines that require fewer and fewer skills on the part of the operators. This solution is all right as far as it goes, but all it does is push the problem up the line. Somebody who understands gear design, development and manufacturing has to program the machines to make the decisions the operators are no longer trained to make. And we're not doing a very good job of training people to do that either.

In the meantime, our overseas competitors continue to have the advantage of a pool of highly trained people to fill their managerial slots. In both Europe and Asia, there are a number of excellent doctoral programs in gearing and, perhaps more important, the undergraduate programs to support them.

As with most complex problems, the solutions are not always simple or even immediately obvious, but we have to begin somewhere. A greater interest in and support for the schools and organizations that are training our next generation of leaders is a start. So are conversations with these institutions wherein we make clear what kind of training we need and explore ways to help provide that training. More aggressive selling of the opportunities at our companies at university job fairs and employment bureaus by both individual companies and industry organizations couldn't hurt either. Neither would the careful nurturing of people we already have on staff (perhaps even through funding some or all of their advanced training).

The fact is, having leveled the playing field in terms of trade barriers, we still have to play catch-up ball in other areas. And as the coach of any successful team will tell you, if you plan to win games two, three or five seasons down the road, you have to look to what's going on with recruiting and training today.



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