

Richard Allen:

That was from somebody struggling with our two economies in Hamilton. We have a great tradition of steel-making and we also have an emerging economy led by McMaster University, this “knowledge and creative economy”. You have to be really careful if you’re in a situation where you are discounting one economy over the other or getting into false arguments about which is stronger or which is the future. I support steel, innovation, and McMaster University and all the great work that it’s doing. There are so many wonderful overlays in Hamilton.

There are about 85,000 skilled trades employees in Hamilton. That is about 20% of our workforce, so it is important for the past and it is equally important going forward. It is part of the culture of our community. Manufacturing is still the primary employer in Hamilton, it still drives assessment growth and it defines the character of our community even though Hamilton is in transition into a more diversified economy.

When we talk about workplace practices around apprenticeship training, there are five core concepts that kept on coming up.

One person, from Arcelor-Mittal Dofasco in human resources, now works in a global firm of 6000 employees, and he is talking in these terms: As we transition here, we have to be human and we have to be more empathetic. We live in a time of change and unpredictability. For many, it is a time of loss, loss of jobs, loss of income, loss of relationships. For many people, especially for those at both ends of the career continuum, whether an apprentice or experienced journey person, it could be a time of loss. These people might be experiencing stages of grief, so feelings of loss and susceptibility. He urges us to create a caring environment in the workplace because change is difficult and all the investments that Dofasco has made in changing cultures and other players across the steel industry have made, it is tough, and he admits it.

Listen and support others. Apply good values in good times and bad times. If you have a value around people in good times, stick to those values in the difficult times. It shouldn’t be situation-specific when you apply your values. He talks about preserving reputations so that when the economy returns, the reputation will still be in place. Do those kinds of things for the long-term to preserve your reputation.

Another theme that came out from another player in the community and I just met this person recently, he talked about managing expectations when hiring apprentices. He operates a car store location here in Ottawa, and I met with him to talk about training and development, and he said when our business is flat-lining, in many cases, it’s stagnant, in some cases it’s declining, but if you are fortunate enough to be hiring apprentices, don’t over-promise, and make sure that you don’t un-deliver on your promises. He says you set up a circumstance where you get a disappointed young person, an apprentice, and an embarrassed employer. So he suggests that when you hire an apprentice in this time: be honest and realistic. Don’t make promises you can’t keep. If you are going to surprise an employee, surprise him with more hours, and more pay and more opportunity rather than less. He talked about scheduling decisions, make sure that that apprentice is learning during the down periods to make sure you get the full impact of the employment opportunities. In some industries, summer is a down time so he schedules his apprentices in the summer to take the mandatory school training. He talked about the importance of, even though you might not be able to provide full

time employment to that apprentice, encourage them to have other sources of income, so that you still have a relationship with the apprentice, and when the economy recovers, you don't have to start from scratch. Those were his insights.

I talked with someone from the steel industry who went to work at Suncor, and he said to share this message here today. Don't dismantle training and development in your organization. Just simply run things differently. We put so much time, energy and resources into developing these training development systems and they are sources of pride and of profit in the good times, yet all too often they become a liability in the difficult times.

Don't give into that either or situation where there's the temptation to cut your training and development area. Resist that pressure to close up shop. He likens it to tearing down a heritage building that you put time and energy into. If you tear it down, it will turn into a parking lot and will never return into its former glory.

So how do we keep training and development going? You can scale back, rather than turn off the lights. People still want to be educated in times of change, in times of fear, in times of anxiety, so create that opportunity in-house, so that you keep that connection.

He talks about change. He talks about communicate, communicate, communicate. Never stop communicating, especially when times are bad. If you are going to create an open, respectful, caring organization, make sure that all of your communication is open, respectful and caring, and get aligned with your vision and repeat early and often.

So, we hear this language of: it doesn't cost a lot, communicate, respectful, open communication all the time to engage people in a two-way conversation, it pays off big time in the end.

Those are some of the thoughts I'm hearing from the field. I know that they are through the lens of small and medium-sized employers, but the leadership is coming from some key players in various industries. Certainly these ideas apply to skilled trades and apprenticeship, and any other firm operating. Thank you for the opportunity, and I look forward to participating in the conversation.