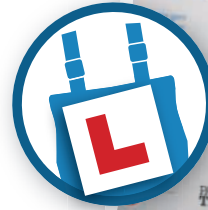


“Engineers are always hard to find, and they are not easy to breed. The key is to find out who is capable of a good job, and work to retain them”

WINNING ATTITUDE

Stagecoach’s Jamie Stockton won engineer of the year at the 2022 UK Bus Awards, primarily for work at its Ashton, Manchester depot. That role followed nearly a decade in engineering management after his Stagecoach apprenticeship. He speaks to Will Dalrymple



Stockton says: “At Ashton, the previous manager had let it go. I was fortunate that the [depot staff] wanted to do the right job, but morale was low, and they didn’t see a way out of that. At first it was about small changes: getting the broken grease guns working, fixing the leak in the roof by the pit – little wins to show that I cared.”

The 100-bus garage, fitted with five pits and three sets of vehicle lifts, employed three shifts of fitters on seven-day rotations, three coachbuilders and one electrician, seven part-time cleaners, seven fuellers and shunters and three full-time night moppers. Of the group, he recalls: “It was a good handful of people, but it was still understaffed and the retention was shocking. People were leaving the depot. Engineers are always hard to find, and they are not easy to breed. The key is to find out who is capable of a good job, and work to retain them. If they all had downed tools and left, we would have been in serious trouble.”

Another problem was an us-and-them culture between engineering and operations. “When a driver comes over, the engineers felt that they were always moaning. Instead, I was saying: ‘Listen to them. Approach them with a better attitude. If they want you to look at a tyre, be patient. You’re the professional in this conversation; they don’t know.’ The more engineers became professional and patient, the less did drivers question the engineering function.”

But he also had an ally in operations manager Zachary McAskill (himself winner of the UK Bus Awards’ young manager of the year). As Stockton tells it: “Me and Zach pulled together ops and engineering. I had a presence in ops; walking the corridors, mingling with the drivers. It was the same with Zach in the engineering department. It built a relationship.” In fact, the two had shared history together, having both worked at the Middleton depot (40 buses).

The fleet engineer credits his demeanour in helping to cope with the job’s daily stresses. “I’ve always been a people person – understanding, methodical, cool and calm. Even in a pressure cooker [situation], I don’t lose my head. I might have a moment [of wondering] how are we going to do this – but I’m not screaming and shouting, making people feel worse than they already feel. I like to get people around the table, and ask them how to prevent this from happening, or how to improve something. I like other people’s input in my decisionmaking, rather than me saying ‘here’s how we’re going to do it.’”

Stockton had not intended to be an apprentice at the bus operator; following the advice of his stepfather to “get a trade or go into the Army”, he had his eye on working at Land Rover. But when MG Rover went into administration, he switched plans on the advice of another family member –

his grandmother, a former Stagecoach employee.

Having now moved to a new role as fleet engineer at the larger Hyde Road, Manchester depot, Stockton continues to participate in the apprenticeship programme, including carrying out assessed ‘professional discussions’ with final-year apprentices, doing recruitment initiatives and managing five apprentices at Hyde Road day-to-day. He says that the company’s programme, which is now supported by training provider GTG, has a vital strategic role to play in developing future skills. “Because recruiting for trades externally is quite difficult, the calibre of technicians that we train – who in those years go from zero to brilliant – is important. When they feel valued and appreciated, they stay and are loyal to the depot and company. We reap the fruits of that labour in the later years.”

Reflecting on his own rapid progression, Stockton says: “I can’t thank Stagecoach enough; they’ve pushed me. The support in the group is huge. If you are hard-working, and have a bit of talent around you, they’ll push you and train you to a good standard. As Martin Griffiths [outgoing Stagecoach CEO] said, there’s no ceiling on ambition.” **TE**