

PEOPLE PEOPLE



Learning how people work requires a different set of skills to learning how a vehicle works. However, that is an essential requirement of a management role in engineering, finds Will Dalrymple

Once apprentices transition to full-time work in a commercial vehicle workshop, they may aspire to a management position within the operator, in which they become responsible for other people's work. One of the most visible management positions is as workshop manager, a role that Clare Willis, engineering training manager at bus operator Stagecoach, calls 'incredibly busy'. "They are managers of people, and also look after the buildings, and they have a health and safety responsibility. They have many tasks to do."

How do engineers establish themselves as leaders? In conversations with a number of senior engineers in bus and commercial vehicle operations that have done it for themselves, a couple of common themes stand out.

First, fall back on expertise. Jonathan Bastow (above), who joined the industry as apprentice, was appointed workshop manager at Haulage Holdings, part of waste collection and processing firm Leo Group, at only 30 years of age. Now Krone aftersales manager, he says: "The biggest problem I've had in my career is that I'm so young. You have to show that you are capable, and if you can't do the job, then nobody in the workshop will respect you. So the first thing that I've done, is lead from the front. If there's a job that needs doing, and no one wants to do it, I'll do it myself."

He continues: "And then I take a step back, and let it run as it should. Because if I'm out leading, then I'm not managing - I'm just another technician. If you are doing that, then you'll miss important stuff. You have got to get the balance right." So the companion lesson is: have the confidence to delegate.

Reframing that point is John Taylor (pictured near right). Now operational technical executive at bus trade association CPT, he has held managerial roles at many levels in the bus industry, including at Stagecoach and First Group.

He says: "In engineering, you have to be a good engineer, but also you have to understand how to man-manage. Those skills are often the hardest to find in people, and in courses as well. It's not about what you learn in the classroom, but what you learn day to day. I've had people come into my office really angry, and others in tears."

When asked how he dealt with those situations, he replies: "The first thing in both cases is to calm them down. We'll work through the process. Why is the person upset, and how can I resolve it. That's the biggest question you need to ask anybody: how do I resolve the issue or your problem. Some you can never

MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT TIPS

SWAP ROLES

John Taylor: "As an engineer, I've had to go to the traffic office - they're the people that allocate drivers, and they've had to come into engineering for a week. It gave people the opportunity to understand the challenges that each side of the business had."

Jonathan Bastow: "A lot of workshops in the industry would benefit from spending time in a transport business environment, understanding the knock-on effects of taking a vehicle off the road; that might give them a different outlook."

PRACTICE COMMUNICATION

John Taylor: "One of the simplest communication exercises is for pairs. One partner, the builder, is blindfolded; the other, the manager, is given a plan of a Lego house that should be built. But only the blindfolded partner can touch the pieces. The manager can't say, 'Pick up the blue block'. They have to be more descriptive, and understand other people, as well as the limitations of their 'disability'."

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fix; some people have just had bad news. Maybe I can’t help, but telling me gets it off their chest. Sometimes it’s just about listening to people.”

It would appear that a different set of muscles are used in management than in engineering. He continues: “You have to know, understand and manage staff. The best thing is to review what they do, how they work, and how they feel about their life skills and goals.” For him, a self-confessed ‘big believer’ in training and development, this consists not only about talking, but also processes: workplace assessments, staff reviews, setting targets.

That approach to education even extends to disciplinaries, Taylor argues. “You’ve got to have systems and procedures and enforce what you are. The first rule is always to try to train. If you can’t, then you go down the disciplinary process. The purpose of that is not to get rid of them, but to retrain them, so they can understand why and where they are going wrong.”

In other words, managers act as the critical link between the company and the employee; their role is to set the tone and the agenda for how the work should be done.

Passing on a sense of shared endeavour is a vital part of the process, argues Allan Eyre (above middle), Movianto fleet manager, who was

winner of IRTE Fleet Engineer of the Year in 2016. “Being a communicator is part of a leadership role; spending time explaining what you need the outcome to be.”

Eyre, who most recently has been working on vehicle specification with supplier partners, expands on this point: “Our partners all have different reasons to deal with us. But the most important thing is that there is one goal at the end for everyone to strive to. If you don’t strive for the same goal, then each partner’s own goals won’t match up. You have got to spend time at the beginning getting everyone engaged on the outcome and the expectations.”

The same principle applies for employees in the same organisation, states Tony Cockcroft (above far right), Stagecoach engineering director. He says: “The first lesson is that everybody’s different. There’s a

strategy, and the way you apply it has to be flexible enough to accommodate various types of people that human beings are. I’ve found that the best way to lead is to treat people the way that you want to be treated. You have to speak in the right way, and try to guide them. Explain why you would like them to do it, and the benefits of doing that. Once they understand why, they will generally comply and want to do it. But saying, ‘Do it because I’m the boss’ is not the right tone.”

He elaborates: “Try not to churn staff. Engineers are so valuable these days; you put so much time and effort with them. We want to keep them for life, if possible. Make clear that they understand their roles and what is expected: what bit of the job they are responsible for, and what bits others are responsible for, so they get the bigger picture.” 

BACK TO SCHOOL

In 2016, Stagecoach launched a management training course for its workshop engineering managers. It consists of two one-week residential modules, taken over two years. External suppliers deliver content for specialist areas like employment law, managing people, motivating people and getting them to work for you. Logistics UK presented a passenger operating licence refresher. Internal experts also provided content, explains Clare Willis. Stagecoach management accountants offered a course on finance for non-financial managers. A workshop planning day featured Stagecoach engineering directors, going back to basics about 4 workshop planning, spotting trends, repeating defects, managing staffing levels, and how to make shift patterns more family-friendly.