

# **THE ACADEMY OF ELECTRICAL CONTRACTING**

**Paper Presented by  
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**MENTORING OUR FUTURE LEADERS  
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The future of NECA, as well as the industry in general, depends on the development of future leaders that want to give back to the association. The most efficient way to develop both future leaders and a corps of people who have a desire to “give back” what they feel they “got out” of a system, is to develop and support a mentoring structure.

In the business world mentors need to be the experienced people who have been through the bad times as well as the good times. In today’s fast paced business, I don’t see the experienced manager or business owner taking the time to encourage or help the young ones. I would like to share some thoughts about why I feel mentoring should be a priority and how we might accomplish it.

Mentoring in business is a lot like raising kids in the fact that you need to set an example so the younger person can see what is expected. As adults, we first learn about mentoring from our children — in fact that’s how we practice our approaches to different situations. I know with my own children for example I would set down rules about being home on time or calling to let us know where they are and what’s going on. Well it is good to set rules but it means a lot more if they see you do it, too — following the same rules and behaving in the same courteous manner. So if I was running late from work I would call and let my family know I’d be late. The results seem to mean more if they can see examples of the behavior or skills you want to instill, so if you mentor by example, it works for the best of all.

I believe, as with raising kids, that the older we get and the more experience we have, the better mentors we become. As a first time father I was not a very good mentor because I lacked experience. But after handling seven kids as they grew up, I began to know what to do to get the desired results.

Young business people as well as young adults need to be able to make mistakes. The hardest thing I had to learn as a father was that I needed to let my children fail! We all learn a lot more when we fail than we do when everything is going right. Thomas Edison didn’t invent the light bulb the first time; he failed over and over again, but each time he learned a little more about the subject.

While failure can offer positive results, the idea in mentoring is to control the failure so that it is not fatal or non-reversible — this is where the mentor can be an invaluable asset. In the business area, when I speak of “fatal” failure, I’m talking about going out of business because of mistakes made. One of the common ones is when the economy gets tight, we tend to cut our prices and keep cutting just to get work. We become obsessed with getting work no matter what the price is. When we get filled up with this non-profitable work, we can’t handle the profitable work that might come along without adding more overhead. It becomes a vicious circle — instead of adjusting our overhead for the workload we try to take on unprofitable work, and the business spirals down into bankruptcy.

Over the years I have made many mistakes but I have learned invaluable lessons from each of them. Some of them I hope I never go through again and I would like to help others so they don’t have to experience similar situations. This is the “prime directive” of mentoring.

While failing can be a learning experience, mentors also need to plant the seed that their charges are *able to become better*. Giving praise and encouragement works so much better than telling people what they did wrong. Think about how you have been encouraged in your life: a positive word goes along way.

I remember well when this happened to me some years ago. I participated in one of the early Future Leaders Conferences sponsored by NECA. It was good for me because it showed that someone else thought I was a leader.

At times in our business lives we need the stroking of outsiders to let us know we are on the right track. At the time I received the first invitation to the Future Leaders Conference I was struggling with my own set of problems surrounding the question of leadership. I felt that I was barely able to lead my own company; NECA was well down my list of possibilities for leadership.

In hindsight, the conference was one of the best things that could have happened for both my company and me personally. It allowed me the time to get away from the daily business and meet others who were about my same age and position

in their companies. A peer group was formed out of those Future Leaders Conferences by some of the participants, which has been very successful.

Peer groups can be a form of mentoring. In the peer group setting there are no competitors as such and the group openly shares information. This was one of the primary positive benefits to come my way from the Future Leaders Conference I attended. In those first few meetings we bashed about everything and demanded that things change. But as time went on we built teamwork and processes to *implement change through our own involvement* in the system. Many individuals who were part of those original groups are continuing to be involved, but we cannot sit back and relax. We need to find ways for the next group to experience the same level of involvement and brainstorming.

While non-competing peer groups are good for networking and positive feedback, we should try to structure a system where experienced business people can reach out to the less experienced “future leaders” of our industry, corporations, and association. As I said earlier, experience talks, and the most value we have to offer those we mentor is our accumulated experiences — failures and successes both.

To mentor means to be available to answer questions but not to do it instead. People need to feel like they have accomplished something — if you keep doing the task for them they will never have the confidence to achieve it on their own. The best way I have found to respond to a question is to ask, “What do you think?” Normally the person I’m mentoring has the answer already — he or she is only looking for approval and a concurring opinion.

An example of the need for a mentoring system is one most of us would be familiar with: developing a project manager from a field foreman; or a JW to a foreman. Our field people are very good electricians but normally they don’t automatically have the skills to be project managers. This situation means that, at times, they can become very frustrated with their jobs and want to quit.

As mentors, we need to take the time and work with these younger people who are making this or a similar transition, and allow them to make mistakes. We need to give good positive feedback to

allow them to grow into the job. Remember: simply based on the fact that this person is a great electrician, it doesn’t mean he or she will be a great project manager. We need to nurture those talents for the future.

Some of the keys I’ve found essential to a workable mentoring system follow.

Responsible mentoring:

- Is a structured, one-to-one relationship or partnership that focuses on the needs of the mentored participant.
- Fosters caring and supportive relationships.
- Encourages individuals to develop to their fullest potential.
- Helps an individual to develop his or her own vision for the future.
- Is a strategy to develop active community partnerships.

How can NECA structure a mentoring program? It seems to be a difficult thing to do, with the nature of our business — who has the time these days to reach out to one coming behind? Competitors don’t want to mentor each other, let alone discuss openly their problems and possible solutions. In my view, it is in NECA’s best interests to set up a formalized structure so that the members have some incentive to begin mentoring others.

Maybe we need NECA to look at the mentoring process beginning at the level of committee assignments first, where members are placed into situations with mentoring potential. The three-man negotiating committee could be selected from members who span a wide range of ages and experiences; or maybe a retired member or elder corporate executive could sit on committees as an *ex officio*, or at-large, member.

I believe the Academy is in a perfect position to be the leader in setting up a mentoring program within NECA. The members of the Academy are looked on as the elders, the people who have served the industry, its past leaders. The talent is definitely in this group of people.

The question is this: how do we structure the process for these people to mentor? Should NECA’s Management Education Institute (known as MEI) offer mentoring training? Should recogni-

tion be given for taking the time to mentor?

MEI is currently working toward restructuring the management curriculum to offer a progressive management development program that will culminate in participation in a new "NECA Executive Management Institute". They are currently planning to offer this Institute in two versions: one will be a senior level session geared to current CEOs' needs, and the second version will be geared to future leaders' needs and interests. Each of these programs will require participants to either have experience in or take pre-requisites in selected finance and business subjects that are currently part of the MEI management development curriculum. Thus, MEI can facilitate the establishment of in-company mentoring relationships as part of the process leading up to attendance at the institute by young leaders. MEI does also anticipate both the establishment of an Institute alumni group that will have on-going networked relationships as well as subsequent "reunions" at Convention.

The Academy can be used as a way to offer guid-

ance and advise to the Management Education Institute as they go down the road of developing the mentoring process. No matter what the process, I believe it is essential that we establish a viable, structured, incentive-filled mentoring program for the advancement of our industry and its future leaders.

*John Negro became involved with NECA in 1975 when he was employed with Nelson Electric. He maintained that involvement when he purchased and became President of Nelson Electric in 1977. The company has held a membership in the Iowa Chapter for 26 years, where Negro served as Chapter Governor for four years and Chapter President for four years. He has been involved with NECA on a national level through the Manpower Development Committee. Negro received the 1999 NECA Coggeshall Award, which honors a member who is adjudged to have made an outstanding contribution to the progress of the industry in the Technical and Training Service field.*