

Coordinating Efforts

Like many Americans, I've been trained with the idea that those who see a problem should be the ones responsible for helping to solve it. If you see that something is broken, and you know how to fix it, don't wait for your dad, your boss or the government to tell you what to do. Just fix it.

Unfortunately, the bigger or more pervasive the problem, the more difficult it is for an individual or small group to fix it. No amount of gung-ho attitude and determination can solve it.

One such problem is the public perception of what takes place in a factory. Students, parents and advisors often think that manufacturing operations are dark, dirty and dangerous—and that working in a factory is a good way to come home with fewer than 10 fingers. They think manufacturing requires more brawn than brains. In truth, manufacturing today offers a clean, bright workplace that requires a solid education in math and science. Manufacturing is an interesting and challenging vocation that offers enormous opportunities. Just ask any of those gray-haired old men who are currently working in manufacturing.

But ask them soon, because if you wait much longer, they'll all be gone.

Too many workers are getting near the end of their careers. But even though manufacturing has been one of our economy's bright spots, between 600,000 and 800,000 manufacturing jobs remain unfilled in the United States. If we don't solve manufacturing's image problem—and get bright young people interested in it—America may lose a lot of very important expertise.

It's well past time that we reinforce the idea that a strong manufacturing base is essential to a productive economy and strategically vital to our nation's welfare.

Many of you are aware that I serve on the board of directors of Citizens for American Manufacturing (CAM). The nonprofit group was founded by Joe Arvin, president of Arrow Gear. Joe has written extensively on the importance of manufacturing to the welfare of our nation. We're a group that banded together because we saw some problems, and we wanted to be part of the solution.

Recently, CAM board members met with newly elected Representative Brad Schneider from the 10th Congressional District in Illinois. Congressman Schneider also happens to be an industrial engineer. As it turns out, he and his staff understand these problems and are interested in solving them, too.

In order to learn more about specific manufacturers' needs, he asked me to recommend manufacturing companies in his district that would be good candidates for him to visit.

So I called a number of gear manufacturers in the area, to talk about the things that we, as Americans, should be doing to solve the problems we see.

Those I talked were more than just receptive to the idea of problem-sharing. In many cases, they were also taking action, working with local associations, educational institutions and government agencies.

For example, one manufacturer I talked to works very closely with a local community college, in order to develop an edu-



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cational program geared specifically towards manufacturing careers. In fact, this individual has pledged that anyone who completes the program at this community college is guaranteed job placement at his company.

A number of others indicated a strong interest in meeting with Congressman Schneider and exploring ways they could help.

Interestingly, nobody asked what political party Congressman Schneider belongs to. They only saw a leader who was interested in their problems, and they're willing to work to help him better understand their needs and concerns. Nobody saw this as a Democratic problem or a Republican problem. They all saw it as an American problem.

And it's not just in the 10th District of Illinois that people are doing something. I also recently spoke with a gear manufacturer in Ohio, who told me that he belongs to an Ohio-based manufacturing association whose goals are to tackle many of the same problems identified by CAM and Congressman Schneider. Clearly, all across America, various individuals and groups are working toward common goals.

But it occurs to me that if we're all interested in solving the same problems, we should be working together, rather than independently. We should know what other groups and individuals are doing, so we aren't duplicating efforts. I've got to believe that with the few phone calls I made, I've only scratched the surface. Many of you are probably involved with local associations, manufacturing groups and educational institutions. You've probably got programs in place that others would benefit from learning about.

And perhaps this is what CAM's role should be: coordinating efforts.

So I'm asking you, our readers. Are these topics of interest to you? Do you think they're important? More to the point, are you involved in solving these problems, or are you aware of others near you who are doing so? If so, tell me at publisher@geartechnology.com about your group. Give me your web address. Give me a leader's name so we can contact them, so I can help CAM build a network of like-minded groups and individuals. Let's make this a coordinated national effort rather than a collection of local efforts, and let's also present a loud voice to Congressman Schneider and other like-minded leaders.