

Empty Space

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Mae Kowalke and Mike Neundorfer

Steve appears calm, but his thoughts are racing. He looks at faces of the 15 guys, ranging in age from early 20s to near retirement. Most of them clearly are not excited to be here.

Will they have anything to say? Will they share what they know with each other? Will they trust each other?

“This is going to be different than most equipment maintenance seminars you’ve probably been to,” he begins. “We won’t be using PowerPoint at all,” he says, indicating the posters on the wall where a projector screen usually would be pulled down.

It is just after 7:00am. The guys, many just off night shifts, groggily sip coffee out of Styrofoam cups. They wear dirty blue work pants, scuffed steel-toed boots, and frayed navy jackets with their names embroidered on the front. The tables are littered with grimy yellow hardhats.

Steve glances over at Jim, his co-facilitator for the morning, one of two half-day sessions at the aluminum recycling plant in Indiana. He looks around the room again before continuing.

It is a dull, cluttered room.

Low florescent lighting. No windows. Three rows of two large, medium-toned wooden conference tables with assorted swivel chairs. Leftover meeting notes on whiteboards. Two halves of a beige accordion dividing wall, pushed open.

“You’ll work in groups to talk about your equipment, problems you’re having, and possible ways to make things work better,” Steve continues.

The morning flies by.

In three groups, the guys begin discussing some questions from Steve and Jim about their plant air pollution control equipment. Soon, the conversation takes on a life of its own. The guys enthusiastically share details about problems and debate possible solutions.

Steve and Jim stand back and listen, moving between groups. Occasionally they ask a question or make a comment. They also write notes on flip-charts.

As mid-day nears, Steve and Jim bring the three groups reluctantly back together.



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“We’re almost out of time for today,” Steve says. “Let’s talk about what should happen tomorrow morning.”

“We came up with a lot of great ideas this morning,” one guy says. “I think tomorrow we should figure out how to put those ideas into action.”

“I agree,” says another guy. Heads nod all over the room.

“So it’s decided then,” Jim says. “Tomorrow morning you’ll create an action plan.”

Before they leave, Jim asks the guys: “What did you think of how things went this morning?”

“Too bad the morning is over so soon!” one guy says.

“We can work out more by talking about it together, rather than having you tell us what to do,” another says.

One of the younger guys adds: “I like that you gave us so much technical information; I really feel like I understand how this stuff works a lot better than I did before!”

Steve and Jim glance at each other.

“Wow,” says Jim after the guys are gone.

About the Authors

Mae Kowalke, Manager of Stories, joined Neundorfer, Inc. in 2009 and has more than 10 years experience in journalism, marketing and communications. At Neundorfer, she supports customer service and company growth by making connections between information, ideas and opportunities using the communications power of stories. Mae holds a B.A. in communications from Thomas Edison State College.

Mike Neundorfer, Owner and CEO, founded Neundorfer, Inc. in 1972 and has more than 35 years experience working with customers to improve the efficiency of air pollution control systems. At Neundorfer, his focus mostly is on team development and working with electric utilities and industrial plants to make smart decisions about the future. Mike holds a B.A. in engineering from University of Rochester and an MBA from Baldwin Wallace College.



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