

Manager calls trust, teamwork keys to rejuvenation of Acklin Stamping

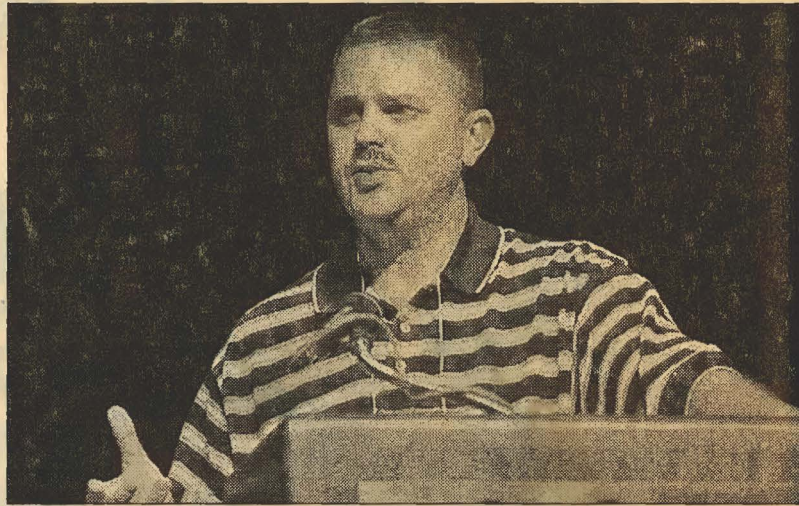
When talking about the organizational chart at Acklin Stamping Co., President and General Manager Howard Ice turns it upside on the overhead projector.

Instead of having the president at the top, as most companies do, his vision of a successful company has the president at the bottom and the customer and then the production teams on the top.

"People come first. There's just no other way about it," said the 33-year-old Mr. Ice, one of the speakers at yesterday's 14th annual conference sponsored by the Northwest Ohio Center for Labor-Management Cooperation. "The production teams are the bases in our business. They ship the parts ... and get the job done."

Speaking on his view of employee involvement, Mr. Ice used terms like mutual respect and said he has no organized program but instead incorporates it in the day-to-day running of the business.

Employee involvement, he explained, is achieved through training, through providing employees with responsibility, and by getting out of the way and letting the workers do their jobs. "The hardest thing any entity has to do is to trust your employees to do the



BLADE PHOTO

Howard Ice, addressing the labor-management conference, says the production teams are the bases in his business.

right thing," said Mr. Ice.

Such trust was essential a year ago when Mr. Ice bought Acklin Stamping, which makes housings for air-conditioning compressors, from Tecumseh Products Co. Tecumseh had announced it would close the unprofitable plant after workers rejected a \$3.75-an-hour pay cut and other concessions.

At the time of the sale, the num-

ber of workers had slumped to 20 from 112. Mr. Ice kept the 20, represented by UAW Local 12, and replaced the managers with people with whom he had worked at Toledo Technologies.

Then, he began to build a team.

Remembering the first meeting he had with his employees, Mr. Ice

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said, "Nobody knew what was going to happen. I said, 'This is our team. There is no us or we. The only issue we have to worry about is the survival of the company, the survival of our jobs. Now, let's go and do our jobs.'"

Bruce Baumhower, president of United Auto Workers Local 12, which counts Acklin Stamping as one of the 45 plants it represents, has nothing but praise for Mr. Ice's approach to management. He said he is not aware of one grievance pending at the plant.

"There is open, honest communication and members are treated like family," said Mr. Baumhower. "Now, they're praised as a great work force. It's the same plant and work force that was going to be closed by the former owner because of low productivity and poor quality. It just shows what you can do with a decent management team."

The newly empowered workers were able to win a coveted quality award in six months, and within eight months the company had doubled its sales, now at more than \$10 million. The company has 52 employees, and the plant has the capacity for \$160 million in sales, a goal that Mr. Ice said is attainable if he continues to promote the idea that employees are the No. 1 asset of Acklin Stamping.

Mutual rewards are important, too, said Mr. Ice, who provides steak dinners at the plant, chicken barbecues, Thanksgiving turkeys, and Christmas hams, and more.

"There's no limit of what a unified team of people can accomplish," he said.

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