

Teaching Strategies for Preparing Students for the Meat Industry

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Introduction

I believe we must ask ourselves what our students and their employers are wanting when we determine teaching strategies for preparing students for the meat industry. Why do people attend a university? I would suppose there are many reasons one could derive that would explain why most students pay in excess of \$150,000 to obtain a college degree. I would also pose the question, why do companies pursue and hire students with degrees from universities instead of hiring persons with other types of training? I believe that most people attend universities to obtain a degree in some field of study so that they will have the following basic skills that were outlined by Dr. Gary Smith in his presentation "Preparing Undergraduate and Graduate Students To Meet Meat Industry Career Challenges": (a) to think critically, (b) to communicate effectively, (c) to lead decisively, (d) to decide independently, and (e) to compare logically and solve problems rationally. I believe in addition to these very important skills that we could add the following characteristics: (1) being self confident, (2) having the ability to work well as a team player, (3) performing well under pressure, (4) having a positive "can do" attitude, (5) having a high moral character and impeccable integrity, and (6) learning to pursue excellence.

I believe the ability of the instructors and students to develop and refine these characteristics prior to graduation will greatly impact their success after graduation. I will attempt to expand discussion on these characteristics and give possible strategies that may be used by instructors to prepare students to be successful after graduation.

(1) Being Self-Confident

A recent survey of highly successful American women by Focus on the Family indicated that more than 50% of them

listed lack of self-confidence and low self-esteem as the skills they lacked most. Employers want employees who are positive and believe in themselves. Students should always strive to maintain positive self-esteem. The important thing to understand is that self-confidence and high self-esteem must be earned. Students must deserve, and earn confidence through hard work; one cannot obtain it through artificial success. Instructors must challenge students to push for excellence. Success will result in higher self-confidence levels. Success can be measured differently for each student based on his or her talent level, not by comparing against another person's success or a numerical grade. Students must understand they do not have control over all circumstances in their lives. However, students make the choice to succeed or fail. Instructors should strive to motivate students by giving challenging exams that require them to solve problems and learn through experience. A good work ethic leads to improved self-confidence. The satisfaction from hard work that results in success will always lead to higher self-confidence. The instructor should allow the student to succeed through hard work. Setting goals and achieving them leads to increased self-confidence. Goals are the individual steps we must take in pursuit of our dreams. Students should have big dreams. Students must understand that long-term success is a direct result of what they achieve everyday regardless of how small the improvement. Teaching strategies that allow for daily and weekly success will increase a student's confidence and desire to perform well. Self-confidence is improved by the focus on specific goals and the achievement of those goals. Instructors should work with students to set goals and help them with the achievement of their goals, which will lead to improved self-confidence. A big component of a successful attitude and improved self-confidence is to recognize weaknesses and confront them. Students should not set unrealistic goals. If their goals are too difficult, they will become counterproductive. We are not always going to attain all of our goals, but the pursuit of them is a step in the right direction and will lead to improved self-confidence. The key is for instructors to encourage students to fight through the tough times and self-doubt by reminding students that if we stay true to the course there will be a big payoff at the end. Instructors should always encourage students to remember to keep their vision of a better future. Attaining our goals will change our behavior. The change in our behavior, resulting

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from attaining our goals, will gradually lead to improved self-confidence.

(2) Be A Team Player

Good communication skills are essential, and they start with listening. Being a team player is a choice that can be made each day and it starts with respecting the other members of the team. While working in the industry, I noticed that employers never asked perspective employees if they could work well with people who were already on staff. I also noticed that rarely did perspective employees meet their future team members. Thus, it is imperative that students learn to work well with people who are very different from them. We must train our students to look for the good traits of others and not focus only on their obvious shortcomings. The ability to interact with people on a daily basis is essential to long-term relationships and success. Students should avoid having to be right all the time. Students often make this mistake and in their desire to always be right, they inhibit constructive communication and prevent productive relationships from developing. Our goal is to communicate better, not try to win every discussion or treat every conversation as if it is a contest with a winner and a loser. We must communicate both our needs and goals to other people so that everyone can benefit from our being a part of the team. People want to feel they are part of the process. We must train students to confront problems immediately, because if problems are not attended to and dealt with, they invariably get worse. Students usually avoid all conflict. They must learn to face conflict and communicate with the people they have problems with on various issues. Gossiping with others about problems instead of resolving the conflict face to face is a real problem. Students need to practice solving problems face to face with other team members while they are in college. In order to be a good team player, students must be trained to be humble, think of others' needs first, treat others the way they want to be treated and be trustworthy. Students must be trained to listen to everyone regardless of their position or skill level. Respecting all members of the team is a choice that must be integrated into students prior to graduation.

(3) Work Well Under Pressure

The ability to develop good habits, based on proper techniques and mastered through the art of repetition so that they become second nature, will allow students to work well under pressure. The only way students can systematically acquire good habits is by being organized. Being organized will begin to put discipline into students' lives. We must push students not to put things off. We must train students that it is impossible to be over prepared, especially in today's highly competitive marketplace. If students are committed to a career in the meat industry, then they must know everything they can possibly know about the meat industry. We must always operate on the axiom that knowledge is power. The more knowledge students have about the meat industry, the better students will perform under pressure. Those who have been trained under adverse conditions will have the ability to perform well un-

der pressure. Students who struggle with their goals must differentiate between stress and pressure. Stress is the enemy and robs us of our focus and inhibits our performance. Pressure is only negative if students allow it to affect their performance. Pressure did not affect us when we were children; we never thought about the things we weren't going to be able to do. Students must recapture the mental state they had before the fear of failure lowered their confidence. All students have pressure points in their lives, so we must help them identify what they are and begin developing strategies to control them. Identifying what is causing the pressure is the first step, because if we don't deal with the source, it will turn into stress and affect our performance. Pressure also can bring out extraordinary accomplishments. It pushes us harder. Apply the pressure, and your students can achieve anything. Students who are challenged mentally, organized, and well-prepared will be able to handle the pressures they will face during their careers.

(4) Positive "Can Do" Attitude

The reality is that we cannot control everything, but we can control our attitude. We have the power to choose to be positive or negative. Unlike so many other things in life that we can't change, we can control our behavior. Attitudes can be reversed. We can teach students to focus on the opportunities in solving problems. Looking at a situation positively enhances our quality of life and the lives of those around us. Positive, self-motivated people look at each day and each problem as a new opportunity. We can teach students to do this by conditioning them to look at things more positively, whether it's unexpected change or the minor setbacks we all face in life. The key is to stay positive in tough times. The rule is simple: The more trying the times, the more positively we must reinforce our students. This is especially true in the workplace where industries and companies are going through challenges all the time. We must train students to look at change as a chance to be more successful. We must learn to maximize and focus on the good things and not allow students to focus on failures. Students need to be trained to view failure as an opportunity to learn how to be more successful. Some students are tough enough to power through life's challenges with a seemingly unstoppable attitude; however, at one time or another we encounter an adversity that threatens our will to go on. The first type of adversity occurs when students experience a major failure that can leave them doubting themselves. We have to train students to step back and evaluate their role in the process. Why did the failure occur? Were their goals wrong, or was it their approach? Students have to examine their role in the failure and accept their share of the blame. Students must be trained to accept responsibility for their actions and to keep a positive attitude; it is a choice that leads to success. Students who can find solutions to the most difficult problems while keeping a positive attitude will be the most successful.

(5) Have High Integrity

A high degree of honesty and morality is needed in today's employees. On the road to success, students are not

just learning from their experiences. People all around us can teach us many lessons if we would listen. The people we know and work with must be used as resources. The important thing is to select the right role models. Students should not look for people who make them feel good or friends who are always singing their praises. Students must learn from their mistakes and the mistakes of others. Sometimes learning what not to do is more important than learning what to do. We must teach our students to take advantage of the lessons learned by people who have made the journey before. The recent examples of the lack of corporate integrity must be reinforced through our teaching of students. Students must be held to high standards and expected to be honest. The response we instill in students when mistakes are made and failures occur will lead to higher levels of integrity. I believe students must be trained to make decisions based on what is the right decision. Students should not base their decisions on what they feel they can get away with because no one will find out. Honesty on exams, homework, and written assignments must be encouraged and reinforced. True integrity is making the correct decision when no one is watching. Students must make decisions they will be proud of in the present and future so that they can lead their peers by example through their actions.

(6) Pursue Excellence

The constant pursuit of excellence keeps students working at their full potential. Anyone can be great for a day, a week, and a month. The people who ultimately will be successful are the ones who understand that success is a long-term commitment, a marathon instead of a sprint. We must develop a "PHD" (Poor, hungry, and driven) attitude in our

students. An attitude of continuous improvement starts with the premise that we can always improve and become better. We must strive to help students understand that we are always going to face difficult times that challenge us. The key is to keep working, because the harder we work, the greater the result. We must train students to never quit and to never end the pursuit of their dreams. Students must develop an unstoppable attitude. Students must be challenged to find solutions to problems even when the solution is not easy to find. Abraham Lincoln failed at every level on his pursuit of the presidency of the United States. He never quit, never gave up, and kept pursuing his goals. During the most trying times he kept his focus. We must train students to keep clinging to their vision. We must train students to focus on their successes no matter how small and build on them. Students must always strive to be better today than yesterday and focus on being better tomorrow than today. A focus on getting the job done right the first, time no matter how difficult the task, will help students be the most successful.

We must train students to recognize that becoming successful is a process that never ends. The methods we use to become successful must always be a part of our life. Success comes with no guarantees: Today's success is often tomorrow's failure. A failure to teach students to maintain discipline and pursue excellence causes success to evaporate immediately. Teaching students only memorized material without a devotion to excellence will leave them unprepared to face the challenges that face them after graduation. "Pursuit of Excellence" is dedication to do a job that is hard to do, to go the extra mile when the easy way out is readily at hand.

