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Tim O'Keefe

A Life of Learning

by Tom Massar, President/Publisher,
American Fastener Journal

Tim O'Keefe recently spoke to *American Fastener Journal* about his extensive career and his role in the fastener industry.

"I am a Learner—a Lifelong Learner" is how Tim O'Keefe, Chief Executive Officer of G.L. Huyett, describes himself. "There is a difference between education and learning, and I believe that you learn more from mistakes and experiences than you do in the classroom."

O'Keefe was a liberal arts major in college at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, with a degree in economics and minors in computer science, business, and philosophy.

"The liberal arts degree has enabled me to view life in stereo versus what I sometimes think is a mono-view that is taught in business schools," he said. "I would like to think that I can think outside the box by always questioning others, and most especially, questioning myself."

O'Keefe cited several important experiences that have been formative.

"In college one summer, I managed a corn detasseling crew," he said. "Detasseling is a process of removing the tassel on selected rows of corn so that the plants can cross-pollinate to creating new seed hybrids. It is very important to remove the tassel, because even one missed tassel can destroy seeds within a ten-foot radius. We had difficulty inspecting because our crew varied in ages from 12 to 18. We could not keep the group together, and with corn

plants being six feet high or more, we could not see down the rows."

O'Keefe decided to divide the crew into three teams based on physical ability, and named them the Tortoises, the Hares, and the Rockets. "We only had one requirement—pull every tassel. I told them 'speed does not matter, accuracy matters.'"

O'Keefe was pleased with the results because grouping the crew by speed allowed inspectors to walk closely behind each team and provide constant feedback. The end result included an unexpected surprise.

"What I did not anticipate was the implied incentive to be a Rocket," he said. "Every kid wanted to be a Rocket. Thus, not only did accuracy increase, but so did speed as the players on each team competed to qualify to move up to a speedier team. I learned a great deal from that job. I was reminded of the sociology of teams and team design. I also learned that pride is an inherent motivator in people, and most people want to do a good job."

After finishing college, O'Keefe worked for Procter and Gamble for two years before starting a business brokerage in the Kansas City area. "With the business brokerage, I was not certain I could make ends meet, but I knew I would learn a lot," he said. From 1985 to 1992, O'Keefe brokered 300 deals ranging from small, corner dry cleaners and

convenience stores to mid-sized manufacturing companies.

"At some point, I grew tired of lawyers and accountants, and I wanted to see if I could build something, as opposed to extracting from clients, so I started to look for businesses that fit my interests," he said.

In early 1992, O'Keefe stumbled upon G.L. Huyett, a small industrial fastener master distributor in the little town of Minneapolis, Kansas. He was enthralled with the fastener industry and the owner.

"At the time, G.L. Huyett consisted of a husband and wife and one employee, and it was located in a cluster of tin sheds with no running water," O'Keefe said. "People thought I was crazy, but I really liked the fact that we were a part of American Industry. I was interested in where these parts were installed, and I liked the seller."

Bob Hahn, the former owner, really struggled with selling the business to O'Keefe, who at the time lived near Kansas City. Hahn was concerned that O'Keefe would move the business.

"Bob wanted me to promise I would not move the business," O'Keefe said. "I told him that I could not make that promise, even though I had no intention of moving. I tried to reinforce that as a steward of the enterprise, I cannot box in options that we may need to consider at a future time. I also

wanted Bob to know that I am a man of my word.”

Upon its purchase, O’Keeffe proceeded to grow the business, added new products, and expanded existing product lines. In 2001, the Company started manufacturing machine keys, key stock, and solid pins.

“We pretty much followed the desires of our customers, and looked for gaps in the supply chain between fastener manufacturers and distributors,” he said. O’Keeffe was also a big believer in technology. “We have made a huge commitment to our enterprise software development, including as of late, the development of an e-commerce site. It is our impression that technology is the coming game changer as industrial B2B commerce is still in an early adoption phase.”

O’Keeffe’s stewardship of G.L. Huyett has also been successful, now employing about 120 people, including the recent addition of an operation in Collierville, Tennessee, from an acquisition.

“We hope to continue to buy companies that are interested in partnering with a professional, close-knit management group that stewards the business, rather than a private equity number-crunching buyer,” he



Aside from visitor parking and an Employee of the Month spot, all designated parking spots at G.L. Huyett belong to employees who have earned certification with the American Society for Quality.

said. “I do have specific experience in mergers and acquisitions work, so I recognize that the seller is my best friend in a deal, but I can also appreciate what a seller is

going through. As trust is built, I can consult with them to achieve their goals.”

As with all entrepreneurs, not everything is always rosy. Mistakes have proven to be good learning opportunities for O’Keeffe. “I always say that misery and mistakes are the steak sauce of experience,” he said. “Mistakes make experiences taste better.”

He recalled a 2008 sequence with a former CFO: “He told me that we needed consultants to help us facilitate a strategic planning process, and referred us to a former advisor, so we signed up. They met with me offsite for half-day meetings on a monthly basis. I found it odd that I was not only given psychological testing, but that we always seemed to talk about me and not the strategic plan. I thought we were supposed to be planning together as a team. After a couple of months, the consultant asked me what I wanted to talk about the next month. I told him that I did not know. Again, I thought we were meeting to develop a strategic plan. He then asked me why I thought I needed an executive coach. It was at that moment that I realized the CFO was subtly telling me that I was a poor manager and leader.”

O’Keeffe proceeded to change his management style and his orientation to organization development. “Prior to that time, I guess I had never heard of what organization development was,” he said. “I started to realize that the role of CEO is not necessarily

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20 percent of management time at G.L. Huyett is dedicated to coaching and mentoring. Here, O’Keeffe coaches Paula Hicks, a management development prospect.



Wayne Arthur started as an order picker in 1993. During his tenure, he has consistently improved his skill set and is now working to become a Master Technician in Manufacturing—a department that did not exist when O'Keeffe acquired the company in 1992.

one of vision and execution. You are more of a mentor, coach, and leader. I also had a lot of bad habits, and I allowed poor conduct in the Company. I swore too much. I lost my temper too often, and we kind of walked around here like this was a clubhouse and not a professional organization." He began studying voraciously, and in 2010 named himself HR Manager of G.L. Huyett. "We built a comprehensive organization development infrastructure from the ground up," he said.

Extreme pain and sacrifice followed. "As we elevated the coaching and mentoring requirements for our managers, the managers all left the Company, unwilling to invest the time and effort. As we replaced these managers with new hires committed to our people programs, much of the individual contributor population left the firm, in large part due to our higher standards."

He explained a number of the tools in use at G.L. Huyett that are designed to inspire and build talent: "We start with the use of psychological testing, intelligence testing, and vocational testing in recruiting. The recruiting process itself is arduous, but we believe that the costs of turnover are much higher than the cost of taking the time to get the new hire right."

G.L. Huyett follows the post-hire process with a tri-annual performance evaluation process. "Our current priority in organiza-

tional design is training and development," O'Keeffe said. "We tell our managers that they should be investing about 20 percent of their time in coaching and mentoring. In most organizations, managers are too busy reacting to the business and putting out fires. We try to push the work out to our individual contributors so that the managers can coach and develop talent."

O'Keeffe also believes that transparency has contributed to a new company culture. The firm posts published wage scales on the wall in its plant. Profits and financial statements are shared openly, and employees receive bonuses based on profits, individual performance, and productivity.

As a Lifelong Learner, O'Keeffe said that the learning orientation is starting to imprint itself into the organizational DNA at G.L. Huyett.

"We recently started what we call the Stairway to Excellence program, in which we subsidize the training and preparation for our team members to gain official certification from the American Society of Quality (ASQ)," he said. "People who gain certification receive benefits, including a designated parking space. On rainy days, non-certified staff members passing through a line of designated ASQ stalls on their way to the front door is a great motivator."

According to O'Keeffe, one of the hallmarks of learning is humility: "If you buy the

misery as steak sauce theory, the first orientation of any CEO is to avoid the temptation of arrogance. If you ever think you have the world by the tail, or the mastery of capitalism and management, you probably are setting yourself up for failure, or at least a big fall."

O'Keeffe uses the location of his parking space in the company lot as an example. "At G.L. Huyett, other than for our Employee of the Month and ASQ certified staff, we park in the order that we arrive at work. If I arrive late, I park in a wheat field at the back of the lot, which is a concept I like."

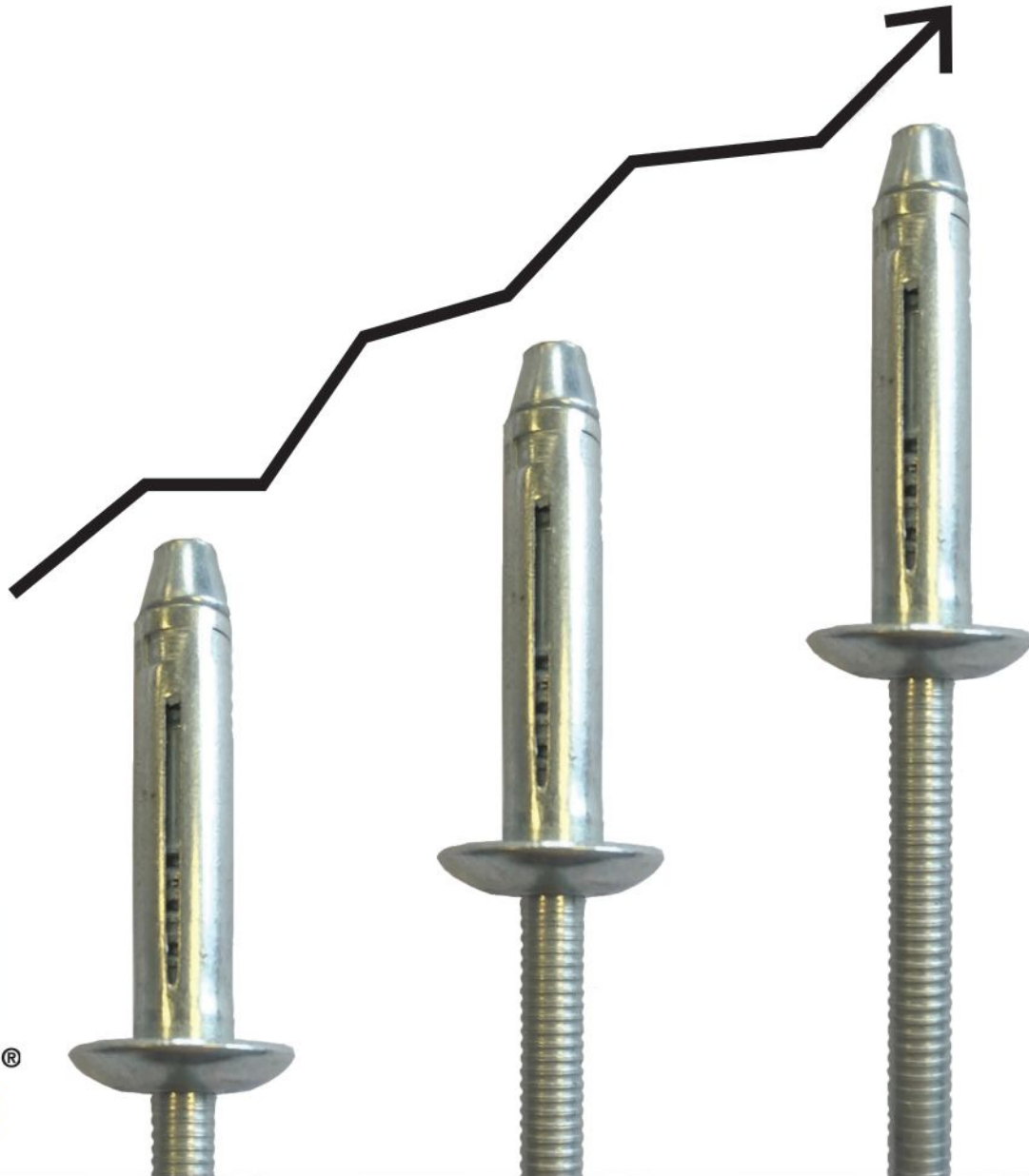
When will learning be complete? "Never," O'Keeffe said. "Perhaps one of my best memories in learning was in high school. I threw the discus in track and field, and we had no coach. Fortunately, in our district, we had a champion thrower who was the son of an Olympian. He was the first thrower in Nebraska to throw farther than 200 feet. During my senior year, I won every meet except for two—the first meet, which was the home invitational for the district champion, and the state meet. After the first meet, this champion thrower came up to me and said, 'Gee, Tim, you have really improved, how did you do that?' I told him, 'I have been watching you for four years.' I suppose what struck me the most was the pride and satisfaction I saw in the champion thrower's eyes. I guess that's what makes me tick. A teacher and coach gets as much satisfaction from watching students learn as the student does. And in teaching, there is learning, because you must be a subject matter expert."

As with throwing the discus, O'Keeffe said that he has learned much in the fastener industry from watching and learning from others. He cites Bill Derry of Field Fasteners, Don Nowak of Falcon Fastening Solutions, Doug Ruggles of Martin Industrial, Jim Ruetz of All Integrated Solutions, and Bruce Wheeler of Star Stainless as his personal influences.

"The fastener industry is not a sexy industry compared to finance, technology, or other more exciting sectors, but that does not mean that we do not have bright shining stars," he said. "I like the fact that we are all part of the Great American Industrial machine. I hope I am not served as much steak sauce in the coming years within my experiences, but know that I will always be questioning myself and learning about how others succeed as entrepreneurs." ■

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