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SuperTech Participation Improves Training, Saves Money, Maintenance Execs Report

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By Tom Berg



The Technology & Maintenance Council's SuperTech competition recognizes and improves technicians' skills, which is why big fleets back the program so solidly and why their mechanics win every year. But the fleets also save considerable money through better repairs and greater productivity, according to a major sponsor.

The 10th annual SuperTech was held last week during TMC's fall meeting at the Dolphin Resort at Disney World in Lake Buena Vista, Florida. Mark McLean Jr., a Fed Ex Freight technician from New York state, finished as grand champion for the second year in a row.

He and other competitors were lavished with tools, merchandise and gift-card awards. McLean and the two runners-up, also FedEx Freight workers, will attend Nascar races during next year's season.

In a speech kicking off the awards lunch, Mike Delaney, president of the WheelTime network of service shops, said he interviewed three carrier maintenance managers and learned the business case for their participation in the annual program. He kept the managers' names a secret but said their techs were in the room during the lunch.

"Our interviews focused around two main questions," he said. "One: How has SuperTech impacted the way you train and develop technicians? Two: What business results can you attribute directly to your SuperTech efforts?"

Managers said their companies now pick and train techs in a manner similar to what SuperTech does, which includes the use of certification tests from ASE, a national automotive testing organization. And when techs return from the competition, they help train younger colleagues and act as mentors. This increases everyone's knowledge and betters their performance, Delaney reported.

"Broad skillsets make his techs capable of working independently," he said of one manager, "but they can also assist others in trouble. Everyone must be prepared to be the leader at any time."

This manager, he said, "believes that people who win at SuperTech have a broad range of skills, and are better prepared to be true leaders in the future."

Improving Operations

How are SuperTech results improving operations and business? Delaney asked.

"Well, at their shops, comebacks – trucks that didn't get fixed right the first time – run about *half* the industry average. They also see that rejected warranty claims, which used to run close to three-quarters of a million dollars annually, have dropped by 87%.

"Productivity is up, and shop throughput is up – because the time to fix things has been significantly reduced. The result? Units out of service are down 20% – no small feat with many thousands of vehicles rolling."

"SuperTech has made us better as a company,' Delaney quoted another manager as saying. "'It inspired us to invest more in training, and to focus on better ways to train and develop people.' In fact, their training budget has risen over 100% since they started, but it's an investment that has already paid great dividends.

"He told me, 'It has gained the attention of the company's top management – they have connected the dots between training and return on investment.'"

That ROI has been demonstrated in a number of ways," Delaney said. Techs are getting a lot more work done in the same time – as much as 30% more among their top technicians. But their costs have dropped as well. Come-backs have fallen significantly. They've reduced warranty claims. And customer satisfaction has increased. In fact, several large national accounts specifically cite their focus on developing ASE master techs, and their SuperTech involvement, as things that separate them from their competition.

Deciding Competitions Matter

The third maintenance manager commented on his technicians' first try at SuperTech.

“He said, ‘In the beginning, we thought we were pretty good, but we got our tails handed to us in our first event.’ No wins in any categories – nobody in the top 10. Instead of accepting this as failure, they turned it into a learning experience, and put their heads together to draw some conclusions about what they wanted to do about it.

“They decided that ASE mattered. They decided that competitions mattered too, and to support their techs at local and regional events. And they decided to invest in helping techs train by giving them the materials, time, and tools they needed.”

The carrier’s senior executives approved a five-year plan that required hard returns from the program, but it moved even faster.

“Well, it worked far better than anyone had predicted,” he said. “They blew out the five-year ROI projections in the first three years, at which point everyone was on board. That opened the door to more training dollars, and gave them more latitude to support even more competitive activity.

“They tracked significant drops in parts costs, breakdowns and rework. Productivity was up, and so was employee satisfaction. Employee turnover dropped. And more benefits emerged, sometimes unexpectedly.

“When they attended a meeting of over 60 fleets to hear about CSA scoring, they were surprised to learn that they had the lowest scores of any fleet in the room – by double digits.”

Intense Training Required

Another interview found that the manager’s company saw that re-work from their best-trained techs – the kind that compete at SuperTech – has dropped 10% or more, and they’ve also tracked 20% to 25% lower parts consumption.

“This last service leader shared some observations on why tech training and development are especially critical today,” Delaney said. “He reminded me that between 2004 and 2010 we saw new engines with EGR, DPF and SCR add-ons. For the Cummins ISX alone, that meant over 800 new fault codes, each of which could have six to eight solutions. And that’s just one engine, one component.”

Intense training, like that which is done leading up to a SuperTech competition, will continue to be required to keep up with technological changes in truck equipment, Delaney concluded.

“Winning at SuperTech today means diagnosing more complexity, more accurately and more quickly than ever before. It means knowing – not thinking – that your trucks won’t come back. And it means taking team-based leadership to new professional levels to guide the next generation of techs. Ten years after inception, SuperTech is changing the way companies are doing business.

“I don’t think anyone we interviewed ever thought of themselves as pioneers. They could see their own progress, but I don’t think it had ever occurred to them that they have been helping to elevate an entire profession.”