



THE ACADEMY OF ELECTRICAL CONTRACTING

PAPER PRESENTED BY FELLOW
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PARTICIPATION BREEDS PARTICIPATION:
A ROUTE TO GREATER PROFITS

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I must acknowledge that I'm preaching to the choir here. As members of the Academy of Electrical Contracting, y'all have proven that you not only get the importance of participation, you're not only committed to the act of participation, but you've also been acknowledged as such by your peers.

This paper isn't to try to convince you of anything but, instead, to invite you to join me in an experiment. Let us take what we have learned about the value of participation and share it intentionally, strategically, and with determination. Let us prove to those in our industry who aren't participating that something as simple as showing up to NECA chapter meetings can and will radiate out and create more market share for NECA-affiliated contractors and more business for their companies.

That is, I'm not here to convince *you* of anything but, instead, to give you the language and strategy you need to join me in this experiment of participation and growth. As they say, a rising tide will lift all boats – and when there's a good inflow of water, that tide has all the more lifting power.

Why me? Why this paper?

My company is in Marietta, Georgia, which makes me a member of the Atlanta Chapter. About 35 years ago, we noticed market share drop to nearly 15 percent and we were determined not to let our businesses just fade away.

The chapter leadership came together to see what we could do to turn the tide and some of the older guys, the guys with more experience, said that we needed more participation. So, we improved services and education, and simply asked contractors to participate. It took about 30 years, but we got our chapter's market share up to 34 percent, an increase that is almost unheard of in the South.

That's the same philosophy that has gone into the peer group that I've been a part of since 1996. You might do some quick math – that's a long time for the same group of companies to meet regularly in a commitment to lifting each other up. In fact, it's long enough that almost all of the original members have retired but that didn't mean their companies dropped out of the process. Instead, we've seen a trend of what had been quiet second-in-command executives transform into vibrant leaders of both their companies and within our peer group; they have modeled not only the responsibilities of participation but the benefits.

You can read more about it in the paper by John Negro, Craig Martin and Bill Powell from 2011 called *Peer Group II: Building Relationship to Build the Industry*. The point is that the company leaders who came together back in 1996 made a commitment to build trust, share information, be willing to give each hard and pragmatic feedback, and invest time and effort in one another's success. The foundational requirement – the part that has made all the rest of it possible – has been participation.

Not only have the companies seen growth, the participants have also formed friendships that span the country and include whole families.

These are the kinds of experiences that have fueled my curiosity about what I see in the Atlanta Chapter. We have 45 members and only around 15 who consistently participate. I don't say that to finger point or shame the folks who aren't showing up but to invite the question: Why?

Where are they anyway?

Why do people join an organization only to skip every meeting and delete emails asking for feedback?

Finding out the specifics is a part of the experiment – more on that a little later – but meanwhile, I do have some theories:

- New, smaller electrical contractors tend to rise from the field as electricians, and we all know electricians tend to be people who prefer to keep their noses to their craft rather than dress up and talk management. I believe the fear of stepping out of that comfort zone and into a meeting space is part of what's keeping them away.
- New contractors might believe their opinions don't matter. We see this in the form of poor meeting attendance and failure to respond to even short surveys.
- While they believe enough in NECA to have paid their dues and signed their names, there's a disconnect in seeing what a winning team NECA is, and in understanding that when you play on a winning team, you're a winner, too.
- Fear in two possible forms: One, fear of educating or supporting a competitor rather than seeing well-educated competing companies as part of the tide as well as another boat. Two, fear of losing employees who network at NECA events. As Henry Ford said, "The only thing worse than training your employees and having them leave is not training them and having them stay."
- In an industry that is largely white and male, contractors who are women or people of color may not feel as though they belong or that their voices are valued.

Now, do I think the non-participating members are sitting around thinking these things and then making a conscious decision to not show? No. I think all of this is going on under the surface while their focus is on the daily work of managing their businesses. Bringing all of this to their attention, along with the value of participating, is part of the experiment we're going to run.

Speaking of which...

The value of participation

You're likely to read my thoughts ahead and have your own to add. After all, you are here, participating. Share your views; give us all more fuel for the fire.

For me, participation isn't about "giving back." I know people love to talk about that these days – they get into public office or join the board of a non-profit to give back.

Don't get me wrong: Serving our communities is important. We can't truly give back if we're working from empty coffers and spending our days worrying about where our next contract will come from, how we'll make payroll, or even pay our mortgages. To me, that's what participating in NECA is about: Building the market share and profit so we *can* give back in meaningful and consistent ways.

Participation is about standing up for what we believe in. Do you believe you have a good business? Stand up for it, let the world see how great it is. Do you believe you are part of a useful industry? Stand up for it, let the world see how important it is. Do you believe that NECA, its values and its work to improve our industry are worthwhile? Stand up for it, let the world see that signatory contractors are the past, present and future of profitable, excellent electrical work.

What kinds of outcomes might we see if more NECA members participated, if more of us stood up?

- We would create safer jobsites and a safer industry.
- We could collaborate on better health and welfare plans for our teams.
- We would grow the diversity of our industry, ensuring a future where our ranks are bolstered by younger electricians being invited in and trained well, and where women and people of color see themselves as integral to the industry.

- Best practices on critical issues like labor management and the evolution of our industry would move from one-on-one chats between rounds of golf to common group conversations inclusive of all members.
- We would see greater cohesion of messaging through the ranks and across the industry, more fresh ideas, and, of course, greater market share.

Participating is absolutely about creating more profitable companies. It is also a matter of integrity. It means doing what you say you're going to do, whether you say it explicitly or through your actions. When you get married, you're saying with both your vows and your actions that you're going to show up for your spouse and your family; you're going to be at dinners and graduations, you're going to take your spouse to the doctor and help the kids with homework. When you join a golf club, you're saying with that investment that you're going to show up, play rounds regularly, be a part of the club and group.

And when you join NECA, you're saying with your membership fee that you're a part of the industry committed to excellent, signatory-based electrical contracting. Slapping the logo on your website is phoning it in; taking the actions to participate in that community is integrity.

The experiment

As of this writing, it has been about 20 years since I was the president of the Atlanta Chapter. I know that times have changed but at least one thing hasn't: People need to be invited. It's amazing how one phone call can cut through the feeling that a given individual's participation doesn't matter.

Here's what I suggest: We start by identifying the non-participating members of our chapters and then we divide them up among the participating members who agree to reach out.

When you reach out, be prepared to listen. Listen to why these non-participating members joined NECA in the first place; what had they hoped to gain? Listen to why they're *not* participating. You could even ask contractors who haven't joined NECA why they haven't and what they see as the downside.

Take notes as you listen so that, later on, once they've gotten it all off their chests, you can address their concerns thoughtfully and specifically.

When it's your turn to talk, be prepared to speak to the value of participation, especially for their individual business. Be ready to tell your own stories, to share your own perspective. Be willing to challenge their perceived obstacles, for example:

- You don't want to dress up? Don't dress up. This isn't about your wardrobe; it's about your perspective as a member of our industry.
- You don't have time to attend meetings? Participation often leads to opportunities to learn efficiencies in workflow making the time at the meeting time-savings down the road.
- You're not comfortable in meetings? So what. We've all done uncomfortable things because we have to if we want to be in the rooms where the contacts are, where our businesses grow, where we find our futures.
- You don't think your opinion matters? If you don't give it, you ensure that it doesn't.

Tell them: Participation doesn't have to mean they suddenly join their chapter's leadership committee. Participation can be as simple as responding to chapter and NECA National emails and surveys. It can be sending a team member to chapter meetings. Participation can grow from whatever seed is planted.

Make your invitation to participate clear and overt. Ask them if you can follow up with them. Ask what else they need in order to follow through. This isn't a scripted thing; this is a conversation between two members of the same industry, folks who share many of the same professional values.

When they do participate, in whatever way, be sure to acknowledge the effort. Participation is a continual process and defaulting to non-participation is far too easy to do. Let's make the welcome as inviting as a slice of warm pecan pie.

Remember: While we all know that saying about horses and water, the way we lead the horse makes a good bit of difference.

I started this paper by saying two things: That I know I'm preaching to the choir and that individual acts of participation lead to increased market share over time. So, yes, I'm asking you, who already participate, to participate more and in a new way.

This is no two-week experiment but instead a rolling experiment as new contractors join our industry and our organization. The sea change starts with us.

About Jerry Hayes

Jerry started United Electric (UECO) in 1986; utilizing many of the techniques of participation described above, he has grown the company to 100 employees as he continues to work toward his goal of making UECO the best company of its size in Georgia. Joining him in his efforts are both of his children, CFO Jennifer Woods and VP Matthew Hayes. A 5th generation Georgian, Jerry currently holds Electrical and Low Voltage Contractors licenses in Georgia and Alabama, is a member of The Greater Atlanta Electric League, and serves on the Georgia State Licensing Board. Jerry has chaired ELECTRI and District 3 PLC, served on each AECA committees over time, and has acted as both President and Governor of AECA. In 2018, Jerry's service to the industry was acknowledged with The Wendt Award.

When he's not focused on growing his business and the industry, he's enjoying travels with his wife of 39 years, Judy, golf with friends and his son Matthew, and time with his grandchildren, Kate, Amelia, and Henry.

