

what's working

a colorful approach
to life skills training



Gene Kent

Executive Director,
International Brotherhood
of Electrical Workers (IBEW)
Local 134 National Electrical
Contractors Association
(NECA) Chicago In-Tech
Technical Institute,
Alsip, Illinois



Alex Willis

Founder and
Chief Executive Officer,
Leadership Surge,
Chicago, Illinois

by | **Kathy Bergstrom, CEBS**

As an apprentice electrician, Greg Winters runs into some colorful personalities on the jobsite.

But those colors have taken on new meaning ever since Winters took a personality assessment offered by his apprenticeship fund during his fourth year.

He discovered that his personality type is orange, which means he's outgoing, active and competitive. It also means that he learns best by seeing and doing rather than by studying, and he's apt to say what's on his mind. When he learned about the traits of his and other personality types (orange, blue, gold and green), "it gave me clarity on the behavior and interactions that I was having and how to be around other people," Winters recalled.

Personality assessment is one of six courses in the Life Skills Mastery curriculum taught to fourth-year apprentices at the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 134 National Electrical Contractors Association (NECA) Chicago In-Tech Technical Institute in Alsip, Illinois, just outside of Chicago. The program aims to guide apprentices on a path to more balanced, successful lives, both on and off the job.

Winters, who is set to complete his apprenticeship in December, welcomed the chance to participate in the classes. "I knew that our trade needed that," he said.

He has witnessed firsthand the negative impact that bad tempers, attitudes and disrespectful behavior can have on a jobsite. Because of those experiences, he appreciated having a class on emotional intelligence to help him and his fellow apprentices navigate those challenges.

"I study people's habits, and I study the way they are so that I can get along with them better," Winters said, adding that the classes taught him how to communicate with forepersons on jobs.

Seeing a Need

The idea for the life skills curriculum came from In-Tech Executive Director Gene Kent's experience as a young apprentice. He admired the skills of the journeyworkers who trained him but noticed that many struggled with certain aspects of their lives such as divorce, problematic substance use or other personal issues.

"When I became director, I wanted to create a set of tools or training that would offer people the skills to help them navigate life," Kent explained. Many people don't learn those skills—either because they were never formally taught or because they don't have a mentor, he noted.

After Kent became In-Tech executive director in 2018, he discussed his idea with a group of contractors at a networking event. One of them suggested he should get in touch with Alex Willis, founder of corporate training and development firm Leadership Surge. Willis had already been working with an electrical contractor group to develop leadership classes.

"We were both on the same page. Both our visions aligned, and Alex had a lot of resources and experience in this type of work," Kent added.

Creating a Curriculum

Willis and Kent worked together to develop the Life Skills Mastery curriculum, which includes classes covering the following topics.

- Personality assessment
- Emotional intelligence
- Time management
- Stress management
- Finance management
- Resiliency

The classes are structured as six three-hour seminars that fourth-year apprentices can attend in the evening.

Understanding Different Personality Types

The personality assessment, “The Four Lenses,” is offered during the first class and sets a baseline for the rest of the curriculum. Rather than answering a series of questions, apprentices look at a series of pictures and read statements to determine which of the four personality types best describes them.

“The idea is that everybody is made up of all four colors, and there is no right or wrong,” noted Willis. “The discussion centers on the communication preferences and motivations of the different personality types.”

When people have this knowledge about themselves and others, they can improve their ability to work and communicate more effectively, he explained. And the personality assessment influences content in the other courses as well. “We try to show how all four lenses play out in all areas of our lives,” Willis added.

For example, the financial literacy course covers how attitudes toward money tend to vary by personality type. A gold personality tends to be conservative with their money and save more, while an orange personality tends to take more risks and save less.

The behaviors associated with the personality colors are especially prominent for younger people, who tend to be “hard core one color”—unlike older people, whose personality colors tend to blend more, said Willis. That makes the assessment particularly relevant to young apprentices.

In recognition of the impact that personality can have on many aspects of work, In-Tech has begun offering the personality assessment to first-, second- and third-year apprentices as well.

“A lot of what we do is habit-forming or habit-based, and if we are stressed by something, we may respond in a very

quick, knee-jerk way,” Kent said. “We want them to stop and choose their response.”

Making an Impact

Learning these skills can improve apprentice interactions with co-workers and customers, noted Kent and Willis.

“People normally don’t get fired because of their skills—it’s because of their personality and interactions with other people. Giving them that foundational understanding of people and helping them be able to read people gives them a huge advantage,” Willis explained. “If they know their foreperson is gold, for example, they should make sure to show up on time, tell the foreperson they have a work plan and let them know exactly what they’re doing that day.”

And the lessons learned go beyond the jobsite: Winters said he’s learned to apply the communication skills to his personal life as well.

“A lot of construction workers bring their construction tone to their home. I caught myself doing that with a few girlfriends, but now I’ve learned to separate that behavior.” He added that the courses—particularly the session on emotional intelligence—have “shifted my whole perspective on life, on how you can really achieve what you want.”

The life skills program is still new, so it’s difficult to measure the impact on retention of apprentices at In-Tech, but leaders feel confident that it’s making a difference. The program also shows apprentices that the organization cares about them, Kent pointed out.

“We’re trying to teach them the skills and give them the tools that enrich their lives, not just their jobs as electricians. It’s going to help them make better decisions. We’re trying to help them become better people—and, as a side benefit, they’re going to be better electricians.”

