

The problem

Daniel Villao, deputy administrator of the Department of Labor's apprenticeship office, recently called apprenticeships a "high-impact, family transforming opportunity." Women around the country are hearing the call and turning to skilled trades apprenticeships for a life-changing opportunity of their own. Changes in technology and safety have made it easier than ever to be on a job site. So why aren't more women ditching their low-skill/low-wage jobs for the chance to earn money and have benefits from the first day of their apprenticeship until the day they retire? Because it's hard. Not the actual work, but what comes with it. Women entering a skilled trade apprenticeship are often subject to discrimination, intimidation and insecurity. They are usually the only female on the job and less likely to speak up when being harassed. They don't have many child care options, so they skip out on camaraderie-building nights out, union meetings, and higher-paying jobs out of town. They face isolation and a lack of support from their male co-workers. The problem isn't recruiting women into the skilled trades -- it's retaining them.

The solution

There is a significant amount of time and money spent onboarding a new apprentice. Why invest either if the likelihood of the apprentice leaving after a few months is high? Would you want your top apprentice to leave because they didn't feel comfortable or safe going to work? Every coordinator I've spoken to that has a female apprentice raves about their quality of work, their drive and their work ethic. Forming a women's committee will make your job as a training director easier in the long run because a higher retention rate of good apprentices equates less work and hassle on your shoulders to find another good candidate to replace the one you lost.

One of the easiest ways to retain women in the skilled trades to provide a support system for them. Many local unions have found success in forming women's committees as a means of support and mentoring. A women's committee is formed to allow the women a safe space to discuss what to do when their foreman won't stop staring at their chest or their contractor won't give them the "tough", usually higher-paying, jobs. It's formed to help build women up, not to tear men down.

I understand that many training directors worry that having a women's committee, or even bringing on a female apprentice, will open them up to scrutiny and lawsuits. But that's not the case; it may protect you from both. A woman is going to feel more comfortable talking to other women about the hardships she is enduring, no matter how kind or understanding her male boss or co-workers may be. The men will never understand what it's like to have to look over your shoulder at night in a well-lit parking lot and will never be asked to get coffee for everyone in the staff meeting. A women's committee allows women a place to share problems and seek advice from other women who have been through the same issues and have similar perspectives.

The logistics

Forming a women's committee takes only time and a desire to help. Start by talking to the women you already employ and find out if they would be interested in forming a committee. Explain why it's important, what it can achieve and how it will help them. It shouldn't be a hard sell. Work with the women in your local to identify challenges, goals you want to achieve and make sure everyone knows the women's committee is not a social committee.

Once they are committed, reach out to other local unions who have women's committees and ask for help. Contact your local (or nearest) tradeswomen organization, like Chicago Women in the Trades or Oregon Tradewomen Inc., for resources like professional development, planning events, and best practices. Women's committees are set up to help women and they will be more than willing to help you form your own women's committee and provide guidance.

And if you only have one woman at your local? Find another local, either in another trade or location, that would be willing to have her as a satellite member. Having one person to talk to can make all the difference in if she stays or goes.