

THE FIX

A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

Guests: Chris Griffin & Keith Dorton, [Trades Education Center](#)

Run Time: 21:37

Questions or Feedback: thefix@oatey.com

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Katherine Lehtinen: Welcome to *The Fix*, the podcast made for the trades, where we sit down with inspiring individuals across the trades to discuss their unique take on the industry, including career paths, job site stories, overcoming challenges, and everything in between. I'm your host, Katherine, a marketer here at Oatey with my co-host and friend, Doug, one of Oatey's resident experts in all things trades.

The Fix is more than a podcast. It's a community, a community built to support tradespeople and inspire the next generation of essential pros. Let's start the conversation. Well, Doug, today we have quite the dynamic duo.

Doug Buchan: Absolutely. This is like a Batman and Robin. It's also like a comfort food like on a cold day. Because it's winter, you've got grilled cheese and tomato soup.

Katherine: Yes.

Doug: Okay. Well, we've got our grilled cheese and tomato soup today, because we've got not only hands-on expertise, but we've got classroom knowledge outstanding professionalism.

Okay?

Katherine: [laughs]

THE FIX

A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

Doug: I can't even think of all the words I want to describe these duo with. Yes.

Chris Griffin: Those are lots of words actually.

Doug: Extremely excited.

Chris: I'm not usually referred to as tomato soup, but I'll take it.

[laughter]

Katherine: You could be the grilled cheese.

Doug: Yes, you could be the grilled cheese.

Chris: I've been called a lot worse definitely.

Keith Dorton: Yes. Yes.

Katherine: Well, welcome Chris Griffin and Keith Dorton. Am I saying that correctly?

Chris: You got it.

Katherine: All right. Excellent. Who are from the Trades Education Center, who exist-- which I love this-- educate through experience. Welcome to you both.

Doug: Thank you guys for having us.

Chris: Thank you very much.

Katherine: Can either one of you share with us the inspiration behind founding Trades Education Center, and the vision you have for its impact on the trades industry?

Keith: Sure. Chris, I really started with Chris a couple of years ago through the process of owning and running a plumbing business with his dad.

THE FIX

A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

Chris: Yes, we got a multi-truck business here in the Atlanta area, and we had no help, like no help. It came down to a thing of like, "All right. If the local education system is going to do something, we're going to have to do something to help remedy this." I did. I put some stuff together and I went to somebody who I trust very much, and I brought them a whole bunch of my stuff. They started explaining education to me and I'm a plumber, so I was like, "Yes, I'm not going to do that."

Keith: I'm not doing that.

Katherine: [laughs]

Chris: It sat dormant for about a year, about a year. Then I got hooked up with Keith, who I've known a very long time. I brought him and I was like, "Keith, this is what I'm doing, man. Can you help with being a recovering public school teacher?"

Keith: A recovering public school teacher, yes.

Katherine: [laughs]

Chris: I was immediately excited just because I've-- While I've been in a couple of different industries, I've always admired those who were working with their hands. My grandfather, both of my grandfathers did. I've got some really close friends that I grew up with that got into the trades and just admired what they did, and admired what they do.

Keith: Then add Chris to the ball game years ago through our wives we met, and just admiring people that work with their hands because we can't. None of the other things happen without those.

THE FIX

A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

Katherine: That's right.

Keith: Schools can't open without plumbers. Businesses can't open without plumbers. The important stuff.

Chris: I always say we're number one in the number two business, so that's excellent.

Katherine: I like it. Chris, let's talk a little bit about growing up immersed in the plumbing industry. What are some of the valuable lessons that you learned from your father and other tradesmen that have shaped your approach to business and education?

Chris: Yes, so it's interesting. I think like a lot of people in the plumbing industry, me being second generation like a lot of us, it definitely comes down to something you grew up doing. That's how we see people getting into the industry and have for the last 20, 30 years. It was either yourself or a family member, and you followed in their footsteps. We did a lot of work, a lot of different avenues of plumbing, and just picked up on it.

It's always been something that has been very consistent. Even through downtimes, although it changes a little bit, there's always a need for what we do. Taking that and applying it through a real customer-oriented customer service model, it's made it to where our local company has done very well focusing on customers by doing good plumbing, but more than that it's focusing on customers and who our clients are.

Katherine: Then, obviously Keith, transitioning from a graphic design to education is quite a shift. What motivated you? I know, obviously, I heard the wives connected, but what motivated you to make this change?

THE FIX

A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

Keith: Well, graphic design to teaching was just trying to find a job locally. I worked in Buckhead, Alpharetta, places around Atlanta that weren't going to be close to home when I got married. We got further out northeast of Atlanta, and there was nothing at the time in graphic design, but I'd done a lot of work with our church youth group. I really enjoyed working with kids, really enjoyed watching them learn and see the light bulbs come on. I thought, "Maybe that's it. Maybe I need to be in the classroom," and made that jump. Man, the doors flew open left and right, and the experience was awesome. Learned a lot-

Katherine: [chuckles] I bet.

Keith: - from kids and parents. Then over time, things changed a little, or a lot, and I found myself wondering if there was something else I needed to be doing besides where I was. It was becoming more of a challenge to stay. I thought maybe now is the time to change to focus on what happens to these kids when they get out of high school. Can I impact the adult sphere of the workforce? Thankfully, Chris came along and said, "Hey, I got a great opportunity for you."

Doug: Well, what I love about Chris is he identifies himself as an unsuccessful DIYer. I love that. That's a new term that I'm going to use now in my daily life.

Keith: Oh, yes, that's me.

Katherine: Oh, no, that's Keith.

Doug: Oh, Keith?

Katherine: That's Keith.

THE FIX

A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

Doug: Oh, Keith? Okay.

Katherine: No, no, no. That's Keith.

Doug: Sorry.

Keith: Yes.

Doug: Yes, I love that. I've never heard that term before, but I'm going to use it now. I'm going to steal it from you. Also, you got to remember with every great plumbing system, you got to have a good design. The graphic design helps out, right?

Chris, question for you. It was a difficult thing that I used to have to deal with on a continuous basis. You acquire employees, or you have students come to you, and they're bringing past experiences, right?

Chris: Yes.

Doug: Well, what is your methodology on how do I break those without telling them or offending them, because you don't know who trained them in that area?

Chris: No, that's a very good point because you do. Especially as you age and as you progress in the trade, you become more and more set in your ways. I think every time we have this conversation, and I'm not saying this because we're on with you guys, but the type of glue that you use as a plumber, right? If anybody hands me the wrong glue, I'm like, "I don't want that crap. Get that away from me," right? You get very set in your ways. For me, it's Oatey Heavy Duty Green. If somebody hands me something else, I don't care what it is, I don't want it. I want my glue.

THE FIX

A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

What you run into is you do-- You run into plumbers who get very, very stuck in their ways in trying to lean on that experience and say, "We appreciate that. I know you have that knowledge. These are the procedures that we do in our company," and trying to get people on board with that, which is why I really like bringing up and onboarding from a younger perspective, because we can train them in the ways that-- not only the ethical ways but the proper ways of doing things. I know that's how you were taught, but that might not be accurate. Actually, the code might have changed.

Katherine: Codes change.

Chris: I've seen that with my dad. My dad and I still joke. He's retired. He'll come in and be like, "You can't do that." I was like, "Dad, the code's different, dad. It's different now." He gets all angry about it. It's entertaining being in the office with him.

Katherine: Oh, I'm sure.

Chris: It's fantastic. Of course, my dad grew up with-- when he was in the trade in the mid-'70. It was all lead and oakum, and it was-- He came through a lot of change in the introduction of PVC and all that stuff. He gets stuck in those old ways. Sometimes having that is a-- Sometimes it is a challenge of how to correct, but do it in a way that is saying, "Hey, we appreciate it, but--"

Keith: Sure.

Chris: It can't be difficult though.

THE FIX

A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

Doug: Well, he just mentioned about the Oatey Cement. I will say cement. I know you said glue. I won't hold that against you. Okay?

[laughter]

Chris: Yes. I tell people that it's actually one of the things we teach in our school. Yes. It's not going well with that because everybody's like, "Oh, I can take it. Just go." No, it's actually a fusion joint. You're actually melting these pipes together and it's different. It's not like getting crazy glue and gluing the pipe together.

Doug: Absolutely.

Chris: I agree with you 100%.

Doug: We can go virtual training with that.

Katherine: Yes, Doug. We have a couple of master plumbers on staff that train the ASTM standard, so we would be more than happy to do one of those and teach about the webbing that happens, that when you solven cement plastic together.

Doug: I'll make sure that I mentioned the heavy duty green glue.

Katherine: Yes.

[laughter]

Doug: Hey, but you know what? Go think about this. I started this meeting off by saying that we're in a comfortable zone, right, the tomato soup and grilled cheese, the heavy-duty cement glue? I say glue--

Katherine: You can say.

THE FIX

A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

Doug: Do you believe that? Now, you're promoting. That's your comfort zone right there.

Katherine: Yes.

Doug: I said that I had five goals when I come to Oatey, and one of the goals that I have is, if you mention something about plumbing, the first thought that comes to your head is Oatey. Just like if I ask you for a facial tissue, are you going to think Kleenex? There you go.

Katherine: Yes.

Doug: We're going to be the brand of choice.

Keith: There you go. Especially with the product line, like I said, not speaking into it. With the product line being as vast and covering as much as it does, shy of fixtures, all the bag traps or slip joint, all that stuff. there's so much. Washing machine boxes, ice maker boxes, and like I said, we have a palette of the stuff that we have for the school because, like you said, it's the name. it's Oatey.

Keith: You mentioned that about the fusion. I got to see it firsthand when we brought our first crew through in the fall. Chris took and showed them, "Okay, guys. Watch what happens." We're going to put some purple on here, and we're going to let it set for a minute, and then we're going to pull it back apart, and then you're going to see that just because you're going to put more on there doesn't mean it's going to work. He showed them how you're losing part of the pipe, and he got them to feel it. Look, there's less pipe here. It's softer in it, yes. Man, that blew my mind because I'm not a plumber, and I'm like, "To heck that does."

THE FIX

A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

Finally, what I had been reading about made sense because, Chris is like, "No, guys.

Seriously, you all need to feel this. Everyone of you all needs to feel what this is like when you apply it, and then you take it apart, and you think, "Oh, I can just do it again. It was phenomenal.

Katherine: Well, that goes right into another question that I had that. Can you collaborate on the significance of hands-on experience in trade education, and how does TEC, integrate this in the aspect of curriculum?

Keith: Well, it's funny. We started using the term, or the phrase, hands-on learning is for hands-on jobs. Online learning is for online jobs. If there's something that can be done online, and if something needs to be done with your hands, then you've got to have your hands on it. Yes, I understand there's virtual experiences and things like that, and those are helpful to a degree.

As Chris has taught me, when you have a lot of things particularly in plumbing that are-- you just need to have the feel to know, "Is it tight enough?" You can't do that virtually. You just can't. That's a big part of what we're doing. The wall behind us is part of it. We're setting up. We've got two walls of a quick disconnect pipe where we're going to have roll-in displays where they can roll it in, they can install things, take them apart. Going to have a frame wall that they can drill to their heart's content, and then we'll switch it out, put a new wall in, Just all those things because we've--

THE FIX

A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

Even the guys that we have in the fall, they're actually currently working in the plumbing industry. Some of those guys had never worked with the tools that we were teaching them. They're like, "I've seen these things. I've never actually worked with them." Doug, you can probably appreciate this is-- I can show you a picture of a timber wool for a whole hog or any right angle drill, but until you're standing on a ladder trying to drill one of those holes over your head, you don't know what that feels like, and you don't know that you're on the wrong side of that drill and it's going to catch a nail and it's going to whip around and smack you in the head. I can teach you the vocabulary, but knowing what those wood chips feel like when they're falling on you, and how the drill feels and positioning it right, you can't get that from online. You have to have your hands on that stuff.

Doug: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Katherine: Keith, talk a little bit about what you think sets TEC apart from other trade programs.

Keith: Well, again, when Chris came to me at first, we wanted to do something that was, I guess, streamlined in a way, and focused from the industry's point of view. There's a lot out there in terms of education, in the education world, but they add a lot of stuff to it. I'm not poo-hoing on colleges and universities. I'm not doing that at all. When it comes to the trades, we need people in the trades.

We can bring them up along with the other soft skills when they get into the trade. Man, having a two-year degree where you've got to take English 101, Math 101, we're cutting all that out

THE FIX

A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

because we just want to get them focused on getting their hands on the tools, getting them comfortable with the terminology, what they need to do, interacting with customers, knowing how to order something from a warehouse, all the things that make up the bare bones, if you will, of the industry.

Chris: A lot of people now don't know the difference between a Phillips and a flathead screwdriver. They get pressured and they get beat up really when they come here and they're like, "What do you mean you don't know? Nobody's ever taught these kids this. They're not stupid. They just don't know. You don't know what you don't know. Our curriculum literally starts at that base of a level of these are screwdrivers, this is a Phillips, this is a flathead, because we can't assume that an 18-year-old student knows any of this coming out.

Doug: Right. Now, I don't know if you gentlemen still encounter this. When I own my company, I would have guys come apply for work, and they wouldn't even know how to read a tape measure.

Chris: Yes, and that's something we cover on that. Some of our guys don't even know the difference. They don't even know when you're talking about a 16th of an inch, or a quarter of an inch. In our hand tools section, we go over because-- Actually, when they start doing it, they have to start cutting pipe, and it has to be accurate within a certain degree.

That's how we grade them, is did you cut the pipe straight? Is it actually within the forgivable tolerances of what we can expect to see in the field? Did you read it right? Did you read 3:16th right? Is it accurate? Yes, absolute.

THE FIX

A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

Doug: Your program, so I looked at it online, very impressive by the way. It says, basically eight to 12 weeks. Okay. Do you have other programs, or do you plan on developing other programs that would take somebody from, say, a true apprentice position to be ready to possibly test for a master plumber's license?

Chris: Yes, absolutely. Certain-- This is very regional, right? Especially in the northeast, the unions have a lot of this stuff sewed up and taken care of that. They're making sure their industry is taken care of.

In Georgia, we are a right to work state, so there is a union presence, but outside of downtown Atlanta, there's not really a union presence. Yes, our goal is to eventually be able to do test prep for journeymen, and test prep for masters and host continuing education, and branch out into HVAC and some electrical. Yes, we have some pretty good growth things that we would like to accomplish for the industry. I think that's a big point that we touch on a lot is, our goal is to reshape how our industry is not only viewed, but the people within it is to get them up to speed and to make it to where it's something that they're proud of.

Doug: That's great. Katherine, I might have to go down and teach a class if they'll let me.

Katherine: I think they would love to have you there.

[laughter]

Keith: Bring it on, brother. Yes, come on, man. Come on, buzz. When we go over that section, absolutely. Come on. We'll pipe you in right here into the, it's a big room. It's actually an old

THE FIX

A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

school that we're in. We have a wet lab in it so we can water all across the wet lab and move things around.

For instance, when we're doing the water heaters. When they go to not learning about on a slideshow. A.O. Smith is one of our other partners. We have A.O. Smith for water heaters, and they come in and our students install the water heaters. When they go to work, they might not be the most efficient at it, but they have a working knowledge of, "Okay, I know this is what this is. I know how to do basically how to do these things.

Katherine: Which is awesome. Finally, for the two of you, what do you envision the future of the trades industry, and how do TEC contributing to its growth and sustainability as it moves forward?

Keith: Well, I think again like Chris said, we envision helping the next generation be a part of incredible industries that have always been here, that have always supported the infrastructure, the day-to-day operations of the entire country. Honestly, if you want to talk about vision, yes, we're starting here.

Man, if we really change the efficiency and the holistic nature of approaching the trades education, that's what we want to do. It's not just about turning screwdrivers, career choices that are going to be around the,. We want people to come out knowing they need to look professional. They need to act professionally with both customers and interacting with someone at the supply warehouse, contacting customer service at a manufacturer. We want them to have all of those things. They're not going to be experienced at it-- but they will have

THE FIX

A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

been exposed to it enough to go, "That's the expectation." The expectation is we're making the trades. We're going to lead them in a better place than we found them.

Katherine: Yes.

Keith: Right now, some of the hottest buzzwords around anything is it's all AI, which is great. It's probably going to do great things. It's not a big impact for our industry because you can't-- Once again, you have to have somebody show up and do it. I think that's a big thing for a lot of people moving forward, is man, those solid career choices. They're fulfilling career choices, and they're career choices that are going to be around. They're not going to disappear because some AI bot can now do your job and do the job of 75 other people.

Doug: I want to see. I want to see AI decipher Chapter 9 venting in the plumbing shop.
[laughter]

Chris: That would be good. I should put that into my 4.0 bot and see what happens.

Katherine: See what happens?

Speaker 5: I love it.

Katherine: Well, thank you both for the work that you're doing. We appreciate it. We're proud to be a supporter and sponsor. If there's more that we can do, please let us know. I truly do believe every little bit counts no matter what and how. Thank you very much. We appreciate your time today.

Doug: Yes. We appreciate your mission. Thank y'all. Ma'am. We appreciate the fact that y'all are, again, that we have just a small stable of manufacturing partners so far, and y'all are one

THE FIX

A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

of them because we were aware of what y'all are doing in the education space. That's what excites us about working with y'all. Thank y'all. Like you said, "Thank you guys a lot."

Katherine: You've got it. Thank you.

Keith: Thank you.

[music]

[00:21:37] [END OF AUDIO]