Plymouth Tube Company: Investing in Tomorrow

Many companies make the claim “we believe in our people,” but few walk the talk the way Plymouth Tube Company does. Founded in 1924, Plymouth Tube manufactures steel tubing and extrusions for many industries, including power generation, aerospace and defense, oil and gas, mechanical, and commercial.

“Plymouth really invests in professional development for its people at all levels,” says Steve Thornton, group vice president of the Warreenville, Illinois-based company that employs 800 people in 11 different U.S. manufacturing locations. “In addition to sending our employees to school for MBAs and other studies, we also have a very active internal development program that brings in speakers to challenge us and help us get better.”

Todd May is one of many who have benefited from the company’s commitment to employee development. May, a 12-year veteran of the manufacturing business, joined Plymouth Tube’s West Monroe, Louisiana, plant as an operations manager just 10 months ago.

“One of the things that drew me to Plymouth Tube was the company’s focus on developing its workforce,” May says. “Our corporate culture instills in us the understanding that we—all employees—are responsible for steering the course, and the company backs that up by being absolutely dedicated to developing each of us to our fullest potential.”

Plymouth Tube requires 40 hours of training and development each year. “My supervisor turned me on to the University of Tennessee,” May says. “He, like many of the executives in the company, is a big fan of the programs offered through UT’s Center for Executive Education.”

May is currently enrolled in the University of Tennessee’s Leadership Success for Manufacturing Site Leaders program and plans to begin the Executive MBA for Strategic Leadership program next year.

“I feel as if I am well-versed in HR and accounting and some of the functional aspects of business administration,” May says, “but I want to be a better leader. That’s what I’m taking away from the Leadership Success for Manufacturing Site Leaders course—how to develop myself as well as those who work around me.”
“I’m working with Chuck Parke, executive director of UT’s Center for Executive Education and lead faculty member of the course, to shape my organizational class project. We are early in the process, but my project will focus on aligning goals and objectives and communicating expectations. I’m also taking away a much better understanding of globalization and how that impacts our business.”

Thornton says he has witnessed the transformation of those who have attended UT’s executive education programs. “I have seen firsthand how UT’s programs have changed our employees’ critical and strategic thinking skills and broadened their perspectives. They come back from UT delivering better solutions and better outcomes, making our company more successful. There definitely has been an immediate return on our investment.”

Since 1989, Plymouth Tube has sent 34 employees to 12 different degree and non-degree programs offered through UT’s Center for Executive Education.

The company’s drive to invest in its people starts at the top with Plymouth Tube’s president and CEO, Donald Van Pelt Jr., the fourth-generation leader of the family-owned business. Van Pelt himself is highly educated, with an undergraduate degree from Cornell University, an MBA from the University of Chicago, and a law degree from Vanderbilt University.

“Our company is proud of our innovation; our highly engineered, highly dependable products; and our focus on helping customers solve challenging problems,” Van Pelt says. “Our added value of innovation and service differentiates us in the marketplace, and our success depends heavily on our employees’ ability to deliver.”

“Throughout the recent economic recession,” Thornton adds, “we never cut back on education, despite feeling the effects of the economy. Although our volume was cut in half, and we had to make painful moves to survive, our commitment to education stayed strong. Our ability to innovate and serve our customers depended on our having effective leaders and a talented, well-trained workforce.”

Thornton says several Plymouth Tube employees have received their MBAs through the University of Tennessee’s executive MBA program, and they have become huge champions of the university. “They come home after each residence period raving about the structure of the program, the quality of instruction, the incredible experiences they had
on the overseas trip, and how geared the academic staff was toward conveying practical business experience. Their enthusiasm has been contagious.”

May is already adding his voice to the chorus of praise. “The UT faculty and staff that I have dealt with have a level of professionalism that is unparalleled. I’ve told friends, even those outside Plymouth Tube, that this is the way to go. There is no wasted time; UT makes it all about you and delivering results for you, both personally and professionally.”