

# THE FIX

## A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

**Guests: James Brann, Treasure Coast Builders Association**

**Run Time: 17 minutes, 32 seconds**

**Questions or Feedback: [thefix@oatey.com](mailto:thefix@oatey.com)**

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[00:00:05] Katherine: 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. Doug, I am very excited for our guest today, and I know you will be too because he actually started his career in the same industry that you started your career.

[00:00:55] Doug: Yes, absolutely, and I did some background reading on these folks, I love everything about them. Their acronym is TCB, Taking Care of Business, which they do. [laughter] Their promotional events are just awesome, and golf outings, clay shooting. Their locations in Florida for goodness sake.

[00:01:14] Katherine: Oh, I can't beat it.

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[00:01:16] Doug: Today is a treasure for us, and that's actually who we have with us, is a treasure.

[00:01:23] Katherine: Great plug-in. Welcome James Brann, who is the Chair of the Treasure Coast Builders Association of Workforce and Task Force, and also the President for The Porch Factory.

[00:01:35] James: Correct. Thank you for having me. I'm excited about this interview.

[00:01:40] Katherine: You got it. Hey James, why don't we just dive right in and tell us a little bit about what made you pursue a career in the trades, specifically which in HVAC, which is your tie to Doug, and how did your vocational training help you kick-start your career?

[00:01:55] James: Very great question. My journey started back in the early '80s. I was in middle school, did not like school at all, fought with my parents because there was a regional vocational high school in Massachusetts where I grew up, and I wanted to go to the trade school, but they wanted me to go to college. I finally won. They let me go to the local trade school, which was five counties, five cities around the school, very large, existing vocational program, Shawsheen Valley, a regional vocational high school is the name of the school.

The first year, freshman year, you do your math, science, English classes one week. The next week, you did exploratory trade. There was plumbing, there was air conditioning, machine shop, automotive, bakery, I think, business development. There was several different-- masonry. For the first year as a freshman, fantastic opportunity. I got to see a ton of different trades-

[00:03:06] Katherine: Awesome.

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[00:03:07] James: -for that year. Yes, it was great. At the end of the year, I got to decide where would I spend the next three years of my life. I chose HVAC because my mind needed to move, and there was a little bit of plumbing, a little bit of electrical work, refrigeration cycle, and that excited me that there was more than just one thing to do. That's what I chose. My junior year, the end of the junior year, at that school, we had somebody come in and do a talk for our class, they were looking for employees. I was one of two of us that chose to go work for that company. I went to work for them all summer long, and then when I was a senior, I would go to work for a week to do my English, math, and science, and then I would actually go to that company for a week. I did that for my entire senior year. I went to school one week, went to work for the next, went to work for them for six years after that before until I moved here to Florida.

[00:04:12] Katherine: Oh, wow.

[00:04:15] James: I came to Florida, found a job here in an air conditioning company, quickly grows into ranks with them. Ended up buying an air conditioning company in the early '90s, ran that for 10 years, sold it, started this screen business. Doug, you're like this. During the time, I had the air conditioning business. I started a plumbing division also, and so I went and got my state plumbing license as well as my air conditioning license.

[00:04:50] Doug: Wow, that's impressive.

[00:04:53] James: We got tired of sending plumbing leads to outside companies. Anyways. Transition to today, that's why I still have a passion for workforce development. I got my chance to retrain school

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through somebody coming in, doing a talk to me as a student, offered me a job, took the job. They trained me, they put me to school. They did all the things you're supposed to do, and this is in the '80s. I graduated high school in '85. That's where my passion comes from, and that's why I do what I do today, getting back at this point.

[00:05:33] Katherine Katherine: Love it.

[00:05:34] Doug: I have a question. What are you more passionate about? What do you like more? Do you like the interaction with individuals, or do you like studying new technologies so that you can share those technologies with people?

[00:05:53] James: Honestly, I like the interaction with the people. I like watching these young adults because they're not all kids work through that process that I went through to see different tasks that they don't know what they want to do, and then the light bulb goes on. Then we can show them the path, how to get into a company, start a career, then we'll help them go to school, and just to watch that transition, it's priceless. The technology part's cools, but when you really change somebody's life, there's nothing like it.

[00:06:31] Doug: I commend you for that because like me, I'm round and third heading home. I can keep all the stuff I know to myself and just be somewhat secure, but it takes a real individual who's passionate, which I now know you are, you want to share your experiences so others learn from them, and I think that's fantastic.

[00:06:52] James: Yes, that's why we do what we do, honestly.



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[00:06:55] Katherine: You mentioned a little bit about The Porch Factory, and you've experienced some significant growth in your business over the last couple of years. Can you share some insights into how you developed your workforce and implemented apprenticeship programs that support that growth? I know we do have a lot of listeners who have small business owners that obviously workforce development is always a big topic, so I know any insights would be helpful there.

[00:07:21] James: I want to say it's easy, but it's not. It's about time. I did not know where to go first, where do you start? I would love to try and figure out how to train some people, but where do you go? My local Builders Association was a great start for me to get involved locally in the community. They got me in the doors to the local schools with their relationships. I went to do a talk similar to what happened to me in one of the local high schools. That was our first real hire.

We had tried it, we have been advertising in the paper. We'd bring some people in, and they wouldn't work out for different reasons. Once we went to the high school, met with the kids that actually wanted a career and wanted to start something, the light bulb went on for us. We changed our process because these kids were still in high school. We kept our shop open so they would go to school here for half a day, come over, and start with us at 1:00.

Now, we closed our shop at 4:00 at that time, but we kept open till 6:00. Most of the guys were on [unintelligible 00:08:36] so we'd give them-- if you're going to drive over here, give them more hours that we could actually train them for. Then we opened up on Saturday morning so they could come

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over as well. Now, we're paying them to come over. That's where the training program for us started.

Two of those kids are still with us, and that's six years ago-

[00:09:00] Katherine: Wow.

[00:09:01] James: -where we started that process. I will tell you, if we had not been training for the last several years, we would not have the workforce that we have today. There's just no way about it.

[00:09:13] Katherine: Training and reach is crucial.

[00:09:18] James: It is. We are a specialty. We built full enclosures and [unintelligible 00:09:23] rooms at this point, so you can't move down from Michigan-

[00:09:28] Katherine: [laughs]

[00:09:29] James: -electrician or plumber and come to work for me because they're not building [unintelligible 00:09:34] rooms there. We really had to create a workforce for nothing. It's super helpful.

[00:09:43] Katherine: Tying that over then to the work that you do as the chair of the TCBA workforce, taskforce, that's a lot, workforce taskforce.

[00:09:54] James: Workforce, taskforce.

[00:09:56] Katherine: What are some of the specific efforts that are being made then to connect employers with potential employees in your community? Do you have events? Do you have meetings? How does that work?

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[00:10:08] James: Yes, great question. Our goal is to bridge that gap between our employers and the employees looking for jobs. That's really our goal. We work with our community partners. I'll tell you, I've got a sign here, and I'll email this to you.

[00:10:24] Katherine: Oh, great.

[00:10:25] James: It explains what we do. We have a monthly meeting. We have anywhere from 15 to 40 people attend this meeting, and there are contractors, there are CTE teachers from the schools, CareerSource, which is our local workforce board. They have members show up. We work every month on different programs, career fairs, getting into school to do what we call roadshows.

We'll show up at the schools. We'll bring in a couple of different contractors, spend about an hour and a half, and we'll just do a round-robin for the three or four contractors and give those students a chance to actually sit and talk to each one and actually do some minor tasks for each one of those trades to be able to just, again, explore the opportunities. Then we work with our partners to help set up the career fairs, to help bring employees into the process so that in the career fairs, we're bringing our employers and trying to match them up.

Then there's our boot camp that we run every summer, and I've been doing that for, I think this will be our sixth year. The boot camp is for high school graduates, and it's now high school graduates and beyond. It's 17 to 22. It's a week-long, we do four days of tasks. Four days of skills, 16 different skills in those four days, from masonry to plumbing to air conditioning to drywall. We've done low-voltage

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lighting. We've done fire sprinkler. We've done turf. We've done small equipment. We've done a ton of different tasks.

We pick 16 each year, and we started out the first year, we did 10 and then 20, 30. Last year, we had 70 signed up. We put 54 graduated through the program last year.

[00:12:33] Katherine: Wow. That is awesome.

[00:12:34] Doug: That is awesome.

[00:12:35] James: Yes, and it's great. Then Friday is graduation in the morning in the career fair. Our goal is to put all of those kids into jobs. Last year, we had got a sponsor and paid all the kids for the boot camp for the time that they were there, which was amazing. We had our local workforce worked out a deal. They had 10 spots that they paid the first five weeks of training once they were hired. It's every year, it gets better and better. This year, we're going to do actually two boot camps, one in July and one in August.

As that group grows, it's harder to corral them. Soft skills are a big part of the week. We spend about an hour and a half at lunchtime teaching them financial literacy, how to act when you show up to a job interview, what to do when you first get to your job. We spend just an hour and a half each day for soft skills. Trying to keep them corralled for that time was a little more difficult, so we're going to split it up this year. I'm going to have two, and we may end up with 50 at each at this point the way it looks. It's growing because we're splitting it up.

[00:13:57] Katherine: What a great opportunity.



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[00:13:58] Doug: That really is.

[00:14:01] Katherine: Looking ahead, talking a little bit about the industry and the work that you guys have done, what do you believe is the key to ensuring the longevity of the trades? How can we encourage more individuals to consider to get into this field?

[00:14:17] James: Honestly, I think it's twofold. I think we need to continue to educate society, parents, kids, that construction is not a four-letter word. There's successful careers. Most of the successful people I know are in the construction field, doing very well, taking great care of their families. It's not just nail and hammer. You can be a business owner. You can be in sales. You can be a supervisor. There are accounting jobs in construction. We just need to continue to get the word out that construction is a great career for these people.

Then we need to talk to the business owners about training and spending the dollars and the time because we often find that we've got 25 kids, but not everybody's ready to hire them. There's that. There's a little bit of twist on the business owners really finally catching up. We talked about this at the beginning that your employers are aging out, your employees are aging out, so there's a point to where they're leaving faster than you can train and hire [inaudible 00:15:35].

[00:15:37] Katherine: Yes, for sure. I know at Oatey, we look forward to continuing to support your efforts. We will definitely look for ways that we can partner with you on supporting at the boot camps. What a great opportunity to get the trades in front of students and beyond, so that they can have awareness there.

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[00:15:56] James: Thank you very much.

[00:15:58] Doug: I think it's fantastic. I hope that your students are aware of the great gift that you're presenting to them by getting them through this process.

[00:16:08] James: It's really interesting to watch them on Monday and then see them on Friday. The sheer joy in their faces when they leave with that-- one, we give them tools at the end of the graduation and a certificate. It's awesome. I think they really see the opportunity.

[00:16:27] Doug: That's great.

[00:16:29] Katherine: Thank you so much, James. Definitely. I learned a lot today. What an awesome opportunity for those that are in your region and area. We look forward to sharing more about TCB here on the podcast.

[00:16:42] James: Awesome. Thank you guys. I appreciate it. Thank you for your time. Hope you have an awesome weekend.

[00:16:47] Doug: You also.

[00:16:48] James: Thank you. Bye.

[00:16:50] [END OF AUDIO]