

The Unparalleled Experience of Elders

To match the extreme weather in other parts of the U.S., the temperature here in Portland, Maine, has recently dropped into the single, minus digits that will continue, according to weather.com, for a week or more.

Jack Frost has been painting windows in the manner of Christmas cards, the sound of plastic scrapers on windshields has become ubiquitous in recent days along with the crunch of booted feet on frozen snow.

It's nice. I like a real winter. It's the reason I moved to Maine and not Florida last year. Still, when temperatures drop this far, it is nothing to be (only) sneezed at when the furnace stops pumping out heat – as mine did on New Year's Day.

The young man from the company that maintains my equipment took all of five minutes to get the heat going again and if I choked on the \$90 bill, well – it was a holiday. That's life.

As I sat here at my computer two mornings ago, once again I felt chillier than I should. Sure enough, a check of the thermostat showed a temperature about six degrees lower than I set it and no heat kicking on.

In a couple of hours, the same repairman as on New Year's Day – let's call him Tom – arrived. Tom's a genial kind of guy who got to work fiddling with my boiler and after about 30 minutes determined that a new part was required; he would return with it in 15 or 20 minutes.

Tom removed the old switch, attached the new one, turned things off and on and generally behaved like a furnace repairman for an hour or so to no avail. No heat was forthcoming.

Soon a much older man, having been summoned by Tom, arrived. Let's call him Joe. In short order, Joe set to work assessing the problem. The questions he asked Tom revealed Joe's deep knowledge of the minute intricacies of heating equipment gained during his 35-year career.

In the end, the old switch was found to be in good working order once Tom correctly re-attached the wiring at Joe's direction. The problem of no heat was found elsewhere on the boiler, eventually discovered through Joe's patient, practiced eye and persistent poking, tapping and testing.

It was a pleasure watching an old pro jockey into submission a recalcitrant machine while showing a tenderfoot how it's done when the solution isn't listed in the manual.

Corporate America that is so enamored with the “creativity” of youth forgets there is no substitute for experience that can be gained in no other way than over many years. It’s not just furnace repairmen or electricians or truck drivers – the trades, as it were. It’s all kinds of work.

Old sales people know psychology as well as credentialed academics. Experienced engineers can keep the rookies from unnecessarily repeating mistakes they learned how to avoid the hard way. And there is a reason young physicians work for years under the tutelage of older doctors.

It would be useful to know if corporate bean counters, whose primary cost-cutting tool is ditching old folks, have ever calculated the value of elder workers’ knowledge or the dollar cost when old workers are replaced with inexperienced youth and there is no one left to show the kids how it’s done.

How lucky I am that young Tom was smart enough to call in an elder expert when he needed help. And how even luckier for me that Joe’s employer understands that the value of a 66-year-old who had triple bypass surgery ten weeks ago is undiminished and unparalleled.

-By Ronni Bennett .

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