



# Why we need mechanics

Our nation is facing a problem that is not well known or spoken of often—a shortage of mechanics. What has led to this problem and who has contributed to it? Where do you weigh in as a parent, educator or mentor? Let's explore the answer to these with a few more questions:

How would you feel if your son, daughter or youth that you mentor had the dream of becoming an automotive mechanic? With the number of vehicles on the roadways increasing year over year, wouldn't you think this is a great profession to encourage them to pursue if they had the skill? Do you train children in your life in the way they should go? Meaning do you study them, ask questions, decipher their natural skills and then encourage and guide them based on their abilities and interests? If they are leaning toward mechanics or another trade, do you support them and help them attain their goals? Or do you have "better" plans for them like a father I recently spoke to?

My husband and I are part of a 20-group where we meet with other shop owners all over the nation three times a year to critique and learn from each other. This incredible group visits each-others shops in an effort to give them an "outsider's view"—offering unbiased and sometimes eye-opening advice about their business.

We recently visited a family owned and operated shop in California where the owner, Joe, along with his wife and their two sons worked in the business. The dynamics of the family and other employees had gotten so tense that it was affecting their entire business to a level that had become toxic. We learned that the older son was a natural leader but had come into the business after the younger son who was a mechanic but recently became the manager—a position given to him based on seniority in the business rather than ability. During our visit, I asked Joe why his younger son was given the managerial position. His answer was that he gave him the more "prestigious role" because he didn't want him to always have to be "just a mechanic". I then asked if he was a good mechanic—to which Joe answered, he was a great one. Then, I wondered aloud, why was being a mechanic so bad if he was great at it and was making a good living? Joe was tongue-tied—perhaps that was his "eye-opening" moment.

Knowing the value of great mechanics, I was shocked that even my friend, Joe, a shop owner himself, got caught up in the same mindset as so many others including parents, guidance counselors, and the majority of the general public—that being a mechanic is not enough. Why is it that this profession is stereotyped as a "blue collar", grease monkey, low-paying, and/or a less than desirable career? Why do some consumers and even Hollywood portray mechanics in an inferior way—as people who have little education and are potentially dishonest in what they recommend or do?

Today, the majority of mechanics are 45 years old or older. They come from a family culture where working with your hands and fixing problems was desirable. It was considered positive, beneficial and productive to fix something that was broken and maintain machines, appliances, etc. so that they last a long time. Parents drew alongside their children and taught them the ins and outs of repairing things and feeling pride in such accomplishments. To a degree, this mindset

has shifted and therefore, mechanics classes have been phased out of many of our high schools and our youth are being encouraged to take the traditional college route with a "white collar" career as their goal.

According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, an average of 76,000 mechanics are needed each year in order to both replace the seasoned mechanics retiring or leaving the industry and to fill the projected 46,000 new openings. The problem is, there are fewer and fewer young people pursuing a career in this industry. The result is a labor shortage that has increased workloads among existing mechanics and made it more and more difficult for independent shops as well as dealerships to hire the number of mechanics needed to meet demand. This, in turn, affects consumers whose preferred auto repair shop may not have the talent needed to efficiently care for their customers.

So how do we change the way mechanics are perceived and add value to a greasy profession? How do we train our youth in the way they should go? How do we meet our teens where they are and not put our own expectations on them? How do we change the mindset of the next generation and expand their horizons in exploring different possibilities and encouraging to work with their hands? We let them know that they don't have to do what everyone else is doing – going to college for a traditional degree right out of high school. We talk about options—whether it be college if it is right for them, trades, military or an array of other possibilities. We educate, we bring awareness and we draw alongside them in order to help guide them based on their abilities and interests.

Eight years ago as my oldest son, Jake was getting ready to graduate from high school, his original expectation was that he should go to college like most of his classmates. When we asked what he wanted to go for, he was unsure. That is when he started exploring other options—ultimately deciding on joining the US Marines. Seeing him excel and grow as a Marine has been one of the most incredible feelings in my role as his mom—not only because it was clear that it was the right decision for him, but because he had a purpose and he was being trained in the way he should go. Now, as my boy is finishing up his eighth year as a Marine, it is clear it is time for college as he's just been accepted into Columbia University to pursue a political science degree—knowing what he wants at the right time for him.

My second son, Jayden was an incredible addition to our shop in his mechanical and technical skills, but also relational and sales skills. I truly could see him running our shop one day ... but my desire was to train him in the way he should go and as events arose it was clear that was not his path—at least right now. When we closed Saturdays, it opened his schedule to pursue robotics where he excelled. Eventually, he received an incredible scholarship to IIT in Chicago where he is pursuing a mechanical engineering degree. What will be his ultimate career? I don't have a clue—but knowing in my heart that we encouraged him based on his skills and dreams sits well with me—even if he's not going to brilliantly run the shop for us!

My third son is sixteen and has no idea what he wants

to do. So we talk. We open his mind to all sorts of options. We put ideas that he has not considered in his head and he mulls them over. What feels right to him? We don't know yet but we do know that God has a good purpose for him and we are confident that as we draw alongside him and encourage him in the way he should go, he will find the right path.

We joke with another friend and fellow shop owner in Oregon, Cam who has brought a new definition to "growing your own" mechanics in that he has literally grown his own with three of his ten children working at his shop! They don't do this because of the shortage of mechanics, they do it because Cam has encouraged them in the way they should go and they just happened to have his mechanical aptitude—making them a valuable asset to the business.

The truth of the matter is, it takes a brilliant mind to understand and repair today's vehicles. With all of the bells and whistles that require endless computers and electronics, a vehicle's high-tech nature requires great skill and know how to fix. Auto repair, done well is a thinking person's vocation as they work through problems that require logic and the ability to troubleshoot difficult-to-diagnose digital malfunctions.

Additionally, mechanics are required to hone their skills in order to stay current with updated technologies—allowing them to grow and extend their experience. When a difficult to diagnose vehicle is presented, it is not as simple as many think—just hook up the scan tool and it will pinpoint the problem. No, often times there is much more to it.

Just like people, all vehicles are not created the same. Yes, we have the same components—arms, legs, organs, brains, etc. But we differ in problems that may arise. Let's take my Celiac Disease for example—at the time I sought diagnosis, my symptoms were not at all gastrointestinal related. Because I was not absorbing anything and my iron was at a "four", I was experiencing neurological symptoms. Thankfully, my neurologist was a broad thinker—after many tests came back negative, he thought outside the box and tested for Celiac—and found the problem in a disease that was rarer ten years ago than it is today.

In the same way, vehicles present with some of the same problems but the symptoms can vary greatly. A mechanic must don his thinking cap and go to work. Sometimes he gets lucky and discovers the problem

soon by tapping into his experience along with traditional testing. But there are times that the process requires much more time and contemplation. I've even known some mechanics who have gone so far above and beyond that customers would be shocked in how dedicated they are to their craft—making creative tools to assist them in repairs, going home for the evening without the solution and researching it for hours until he comes to him, and even "sleeping on it" and waking up in the middle of the night with the answer! These men and women who are passionate about vehicles and dedicate their lives to this vocation are much more valuable than they are given credit for—they are the reason you and I get to go here, there and everywhere, feeling confident in our trusty ride.

Now, don't get me wrong—a mechanic still has to get his or her hands dirty in fixing certain vehicle components, but over the years this profession has greatly changed. Along with this change has come a change in title, which has transformed from mechanic (bringing to mind the image of an under-the-car grease monkey) to automotive technician—a person who uses their mind often times more than their wrench. Our automotive technicians are some of the most valuable people in our world—let us give them the accolades and prestige that they deserve!

I am happy to report that Joe did just that after we left his shop in February—he put his younger son in the role that suited him (technician). And in recognizing the great value that son offered in his skills and expertise—allowing him to shine in a vocation that was right for him, it has turned his shop around. In fact, they are enjoying record weeks but more importantly—their shop morale is at it's highest ever ... all because the value was given to a vocation that is overlooked and underappreciated. Sometimes in our desire to encourage our loved ones in the way we want them to go, we do a disservice to them by not valuing their natural skills and guiding them in the way they should go.

In order to make the world go round, we need all sorts of positions filled in all sorts of industries. It is imperative that we give value to all and that we do everything we can to give awareness, encouragement, and support to our youth in order that they may find the path that is right for them.

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