

ZWICKER

Burger with the Boss



Dinner and drinks aren't cheap in Manhattan, and time is precious for managers and journeymen alike. But once a month, Zwicker Electric's (Co.) president sits down to dinner with more than a dozen workers. Why?



by Joe Salimando

Zwicker Electric is in the top tier of union electrical contractors in New York City, and that city is a unionized construction stronghold. IBEW-signatory contractors have an NYC market share of 50 percent to 60 percent, depending on what's been included and who's doing the figuring.

Yet, despite a strong corporate position within a stalwart union edifice, David Pinter, President of Zwicker, makes it his practice to hold regular "Burger with the Boss" dinner meetings. Invitees to each informal event include a range of Zwicker employees—apprentices, journeymen, foremen, and project managers.

Held on a more-or-less monthly basis, the "Burger" meetings are about communication. Pinter clearly is a believer in talking with, and listening to, his people as these events have been held over a three-year period.

Why? What does Zwicker gain from this investment of time, money and energy?

To find out, The Quality Connection journeyed to Pete's Tavern (established 1864)—said to be the oldest bar in Manhattan—for a late-April "Burger" meeting. What follows are highlights of what we saw and heard.

The Basics



With a start time of 4 p.m. in the second-floor private room at Pete's, Zwicker has an open bar for these events—and the food isn't limited to burgers. In fact, there are few rules or limitations. Pinter formally announced only two before the conversation began:

- No personal attacks (unless one wanted to say something nasty "about our competitors," he joked).

- Questions of Pinter and Superintendent Mike Rotella that ventured into the area of confidential information couldn't be answered.

Rules were not broken during our visit, including the unstated rule of "have whatever you want to drink, but don't drink too much."

The Participants



Thirteen field employees and supervisors joined Pinter and Rotella, including:

- a journeyman who joined the IBEW in 1963, and had been with the company only a year or two, but whose older brother retired as a Zwicker employee a few years earlier;
- several IBEW members who had worked just as journeymen for 16 to 24 years;
- one freshly minted (August 2005) journeyman; and
- one third year apprentice.

While most had previously come to "Burger With The Boss" events, this was the first sit-down for at least three. In making out the invitation list for this event (and others), Rotella said he seeks to create a mix of experience to include employees at different levels, working on different Zwicker jobs.

Many might not know what to expect from a meeting with the President of a contracting company with 300 employees. Your TQC reporter half expected people to red-facedly slam each other as "a horse's armpit" (and perhaps worse).

No such atmosphere developed

However, it obviously takes a bit of time for the group to become comfortable with each other. Questions and comments – and laughter! – flowed more freely in the final one of the event’s three hours than in the first.

Dining To Undo A Disconnect



“There was obviously a disconnect between management and labor ... and I didn’t want it to continue.”

That’s how Davis Pinter, president/CEO of Zwicker Electric, explains the genesis in 2003 of the “Burger With The Boss” meetings.

“I wanted to hear what was on their minds,” he said of the company’s field employees. “After all, these are the people who make you money. It’s important to get their feedback.”

One key to the meetings, he claims, is the involvement of workers from every level of the company. “Some contractors in this area say they do the same thing, but it turns out they have dinners with their foremen only,” Pinter noted. “That’s not the same thing. In a way, that could be seen as elitist.”

Is it working? “We’re getting honest feedback,” Pinter replied. “I’ve told my people that we will have these meetings as long as my people want to talk with me. At the present time, we’ve got three or four of these meetings lined up—so I guess it works for all of us.

“One key for me is a thing I’ve heard a few times from people—comments like, ‘I’ve been working for IBEW contractors for 30 years, but I never before had ever met the guy who owned the company.’ We think it’s a good thing to knock down barriers.”

Of course, as in all human life, the path of “Burger With The Boss” meetings has had a few bumps. Pinter describes one: “There was one journeyman we invited to dinner. He said he told his wife that he was having dinner with the boss of his company. She didn’t believe him. I had to get on the phone and talk with her.”

Additionally, there has been a mini-revolt on Park Avenue South, at Zwicker company headquarters: “Our office employees have told me they’re upset that I have been having dinners with the field workforce,” Pinter joked. “These are people I see every day at the office. They want to know why I won’t have dinner with them.”

The Topics



Contractors might want to duplicate informal meeting like this. Reluctance might flow from the question—“what are we going to say to each other?” However, it should be noted that in the three hours if listening your TQC reporter saw neither hesitation to exchange information nor any dead spots. In other words, there’s plenty for managers to say to field workers, and vice-versa.

Here are ten key topics covered in the discussions: DVD’s from the NLMCC were discussed, both “The State of the Union” (featuring IBEW International President Ed Hill) and “Moving Out Of The Comfort Zone,” featuring NECA President Milner Irvin and his predecessor, Ben Cook.

Insurance Problems on large projects.

The IBEW’s work-sharing plan in New York City was discovered in detail.

Medical plan coverage and costs were discussed in some detail.

Material pricing problems (especially copper wire).

Zwicker’s mix of projects (new construction vs. renovation or alterations) was discussed.

“Vertical” problems getting material to where it’s needed (due to elevator limitations).

How non-union and even union competition succeeds in competing with IBEW contractors was a subject that came up several times.

A new IBEW-NECA agreement was discussed.

Why doesn’t the IBEW have its share (or more) of “Day 2” work? This is a local term for the type of electrical assignments that follow a client’s move-in to a given space. “There are so many work rules that we’re losing a tremendous amount of Day 2 work,” Pinter claimed.

Note that there was no agenda, no formal approach. Pinter was the man on the spot, as many questions were addressed to him—and the responsibility for responding to comments also was chiefly his. Rotella, who spends every day walking the line between the contractor and its workforce, was no shrinking violet, either.

Many other things came up—a new NECA-IBEW promotion approach in New York City; what should happen to electricians who are terminated by a number of compa-



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nies over time; a recent meeting of superintendents from various union companies on getting more maintenance work; the right way to train apprentices on-the-job (vs. using them to run for coffee); stretching out lunch breaks by some workers; and much more.

But, what came through (the “tone” of these discussions) was the obvious pride that Zwicker’s people –at every level—have in the work they are doing.

As Pinter said at one point: “We can all go and do something else if we want to. The only reason to do what we do is to make a little money—and have some fun at the same time.”

Achieving Understanding



What Zwicker and its productive employees do when they gather at one of these “Burger With The Boss” meetings is try to communicate.

It was hard to find an ulterior management motive when Pinter dwelt for a few minutes on brand new insurance



David Pinter (left), the president of Zwicker Electric, and Superintendent Mike Rotella share a laugh at dinner.

problems. While a bit complicated to profile in brief here, they were clearly a management issue. Just as clearly, the problem potentially could cost Zwicker a great deal of money.

Pinter comes across as a “the glass-is-half-full” person. He wasn’t gloomy about the insurance problem (or any other issues discussed), but it was a new development, important to his firm’s future, and of obvious concern to him. At the moment in which he discussed the insurance developments (at the event’s start), it seemed more like a co-worker sharing problems with friends than a “boss” asking for something or other from employees.

Rotella said Zwicker has obtained valuable feedback from workers in the meetings. “It’s a chance for our guys to air what they have been holding inside,” he said. “One worker told us about overtime on a particular job not being equitable; we were able to fix that. Another time we were asked about how we pre-fab custom items for specific jobs—both off-site and on the site. That was very productive.”

On the other end, several workers asked specific questions about medical coverage. With a number of IBEW veterans in the room, there were memories of somewhat less expensive (to the individual) coverage.

Pinter is actively involved in New York City’s NECA chapter, including service as chapter President (past) and governor (present). As a result, he knew the details. “We have 10,000 people working, and roughly 75,000 dependents,” he explained. The cost of covering so many was being borne by too few **[Explanatory note: Those 75,000 health-care-plan dependents include the 10,000 IBEW members who are at work, another 3,000+ active “A” members who are temporarily on the bench, the families of the 13,000+ members, plus retirees and their families.]**



Zwicker Electric's approach to communicating with employees is of interest beyond the company. For example, William H. "Biff" Jones (facing camera) attended the April "Burger with the Boss" not only to participate in the open discussion but also to pick up ideas to share with other NECA-IBEW contractors in his role as a field representative who assists the association's members in availing themselves of services ranging from assistance with labor relations to management consultation.

About Zwicker Electric. Founded in 1947, Zwicker Electric provides high-end service to demanding clients. The company boasts of prestigious customers (Carnegie Hall, AOL-Time Warner) and addresses (7 World Trade Center, Four Times Square) on its website (www.zwickerelectric.com).

David Pinter, company president, notes that there were rough times—including 1999, when the company's workforce plunged from 300 to 80. But the firm is now back up to the size at which it's comfortable now, with 300 employees.

Even so, Zwicker's approach is a bit different. Unlike many contractor's, it buys material up-front for large jobs, for example. Pinter claims "we have the best engineering department in the city—and we probably spent more on overhead, per dollar of construction put in place, than our competitors." That commitment to design and service includes use of more than 30 CAD "seats" in Zwicker's headquarters at 360 Park Avenue South in Manhattan.

DVD Doubles As 'Cold Shower'

Zwicker Electric has held a series of meetings at 2 p.m. on Tuesdays for its workers to see the "State of Our Union" DVD, distributed by the National Labor Management Cooperation Committee. Featuring Edwin B. Hill, International President of the IBEW, the DVD features straight talk on the problems faced by IBEW construction members and their contractors.

"It's a cold shower for a lot of people," says Mike Rotella, a Zwicker superintendent who has run several of these meetings. "A lot of our workers react with some surprise upon seeing it."

Roughly half of those gathered for the "Burger With The Boss" meeting had already seen the DVD. Rotella explained to the others that they would be invited, that they would be paid for their time in attending—and that after viewing the 20-minute video, "we'll stay there as long as we want, discussing ideas from it."

Answer: Grow Market Share



Interestingly, a number of problems discussed during the event seemed to have the same answer—expand IBEW-NECA market share and put more people to work. That certainly was the direction in which the medical benefits conversation pointed since the costs could be spread more affordably if a larger base were employed. Similarly, the work-sharing plan could be obviated if IBEW contractors had more work.

At one point early in the "Burger With The Boss" event, Pinter summed up the discussions of common problems and the search for solutions: "No one is immune to this unless you're six feet under!"

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Zwicker Electric Company
360 Park Avenue South, 4th floor
New York, NY 10010
T. 212.477.8400