

David Polk

Apprenticeship Director

Milwaukee Area Technical College

Just like his grandfather, David Polk is a licensed plumber. As a child, Polk knew he wanted to become what he could see — like his grandfather fixing pipes. His awareness of the privilege of seeing a family member in a trade is why Polk is a proponent of telling Black youth about manufacturing.

“If you can’t see the person that does a trade, and has a family-sustaining wage, it’s almost a moot point,” explained Polk. “In manufacturing, that person works behind the walls of a building, so you never get to put a face with the name of a tool and die maker, or a CNC operator.”

Polk believes that the manufacturing industry needs to create new stories about African-Americans in manufacturing. He questions if youth are aware that they are missing out on family-sustaining careers and the potential that manufacturing offers beyond just having a job. “Some tool and die makers, design specialists, and CNC operators can work themselves up to buying their own equipment, buying their own machines, and starting their own businesses,” Polk said. “But these stories are so obscure that no one gets to hear them.”

The reason Polk is so confident that learning a trade can lead to other opportunities is because it happened to him. As a plumbing inspector for the City of Milwaukee, Polk worked on numerous projects where he was the lead inspector. After 10 years in that position, he felt things had become monotonous and wanted to expand his horizons within the city into a management position. For that, he pursued a two-year degree in business administration and then a bachelor’s degree from

Cardinal Stritch University. He went on many interviews with the city after graduation, but never got hired for any of the leadership positions at the City of Milwaukee, so he continued working as a plumbing inspector. Years later, Polk saw an associate dean opportunity with Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC) that both appealed to his inclination toward social good and desire for leadership.

“The woman who brought me in, Miss Dorothy Walker, was within years of her retirement and she made it a point to try to put African-Americans in leadership before her retirement,” recalled Polk. “I’m forever grateful to her for that. She saw something in me I didn’t see in myself at the time.” She did more than hire Polk: she also became his mentor. Walker started out as one of the few African-American female welders in Milwaukee. She became a welding instructor, and worked her way up within MATC to eventually become a dean.

“Hearing her story, after she had brought me on, gave me even more of a push to create these stories,” said Polk. “I want our youth of color to see and hear these stories.”

Now Polk is MATC’s Apprenticeship Director and wants youth to view manufacturing as a pathway to a viable



future just as they do college. Some young employees enter manufacturing, and then lament that they should have gone to college. The middle path that often gets overlooked is getting both: a two-year college degree by way of apprenticeship. “Employers have to become creative and look within their own doors to find individuals that are worthy of investment in upskilling,” Polk said. “Then they won’t have the frustration that a lot of employers are having now, with trying to find someone that already has those skills, because then that person is already employed, and being paid handsomely. Investment and then backfilling in my opinion, is a better strategy. You can easily go find someone to sweep floors, but you can’t easily find someone to run the CNC machine. So why not get the dedicated employee that has been sweeping floors for the past five years, that’s always on time. Upskill that person and then backfill that person’s position, because I can get anyone to sweep floors.”

The story Polk wants youth to know about him is that of a diligent person who made goals and patiently worked towards them. “I always tell youth that moving forward in your career is like eating an elephant. It can only be done one bite at a time. I don’t want young people to duplicate me, I want them to be better than me, learn from my mistakes, and from my journey.”