

## **2006-1004: A SUCCESSFUL PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN INDUSTRY AND ACADEMIA: RED GOLD, INC.**

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## A Partnership Between Industry and Academia: Red Gold, Inc.

### Abstract

This paper describes a novel university/industry partnership between Purdue University/Anderson and Red Gold, Inc., a major tomato processing corporation. This partnership began with the design and delivery of a Red Gold Corporate Certificate program by Purdue to be delivered on company time and property. The original purpose for Purdue University's involvement has since expanded into a multi-phased project. After completion of the Corporate Certificate, employees can elect to continue with on-site, company time classes to obtain a Purdue Certificate, Associate of Science, or Bachelor of Science degree in Organizational Leadership and Supervision.

This university/industry partnership brings many benefits to the state of Indiana. Red Gold wins by becoming more competitive and creating company leaders for the future; employees benefit by enhancing their self esteem, becoming more successful on the job, and by enhancing their potential for promotion; and Purdue University succeeds by learning from industry, increasing university enrollment, expanding Purdue presence, and fueling Indiana's economic engine.

### Introduction

In order to understand the success of this university/industry partnership, one first needs to have a general understanding of Red Gold, Inc., and Purdue University, College of Technology at Anderson (Indiana).

Red Gold, Inc., is the nation's largest tomato processing company outside of California. Since 1942, this third generation family owned business has been located in Orestes, Indiana. Red Gold improves the community's economy by using a team of 60 professional growers to produce tomatoes on 10,000 acres of farmland within 100 miles of the processing plant. The company's employment expands from 1,100 to 1,500 during harvest and they use their 1,000,000 square feet of floor space to produce over 100 different tomato products in 20 different sizes and containers.<sup>1</sup>

Red Gold's operating philosophy and guiding principles are an integral part of the success of this project and are stated, in part, below:

#### *Philosophy: Growing Leaders the Red Gold Way*

At Red Gold, we're committed to developing highly-skilled leaders with the overall business perspective and skills to work together to make things happen – now and into the next millennium. Continually striving to improve our products and our business strategies has resulted in an impressive history of strong leadership and business performance.

Managing our businesses effectively means selecting and developing the best talent while providing meaningful opportunities to exercise your abilities and explore your options in a fast-paced, results-oriented environment.

Enthusiastic professionals throughout the Red Gold organization are eager to share their experiences and their expertise. Management at all levels has a stake in developing your skills. When you look good – the team looks good. As Red Gold continues to prosper, more broad-based business managers will emerge to lead us.

#### Diverse Opportunities

Red Gold can deliver a variety of experiences needed to expand your skill base and prepare you for future leadership roles in our customer-driven organization.

#### Quality of Life

At Red Gold, we recognize that success is measured by more than financial rewards. True success must include a quality of life that reflects our respect for you and your family.

#### Where We Are Headed

Maintaining and expanding our leadership status demands an energetic, innovative team approach to all dimensions of our business. Astute professionals working together continually explore new improvements, products, process, and markets to evaluate their potential of profitable growth. Cultivating leaders demands training, support and recognition. Our job as mentor is to prepare you to handle an expanding range of responsibility with expertise, insight and excellence.<sup>2</sup>

#### *Guiding Principles: The Red Gold Corporation*

1. We will strive to consistently manufacture the highest quality products at the greatest efficiencies.
2. People are the company's most valuable resource. Every person gives and receives respect, honesty and fairness; thereby building an environment of trust.
3. Timely, accurate and open communication in all directions is essential. We will work closely with each other and strive to achieve win/win relationships.
4. Effective teamwork throughout the company is essential. Coaching, education and development opportunities will be extended to maximize the contributions of everyone.
5. The best decisions are made when those affected are involved. We encourage all employees to search for creative methods and participate in the continual improvement of the many processes that make up our business.

6. Guarantee our customers the very best by never compromising the quality of our products or services.
7. We will aggressively and continually strive to improve our daily results, processes, methods and services.
8. We will work together to achieve a safe, sanitary, challenging and fulfilling environment.
9. Lead the industry in technological innovation and strive for maximum profitability; allowing us continual reinvestment in our companies for security and success.
10. Continue to promote our Red Gold, Inc., family atmosphere –large enough to serve yet small enough to remember.<sup>3</sup>

### Purdue University and the College of Technology at Anderson

The main campus of Purdue University is located in West Lafayette, Indiana. The 25<sup>th</sup> largest university in the United States, Purdue offers over 5,300 courses and has twelve undergraduate colleges or schools for specialization. Purdue's enrollment for the 2005-2006 academic years is over 38,000 students in West Lafayette with an additional 30,000 students in attendance throughout the state of Indiana in four Regional Campuses and seven Statewide Technology sites.<sup>4</sup>

The College of Technology at Anderson is one of those seven Statewide Technology sites offering degrees in Computer Information Technology, Electrical Engineering Technology, Industrial Technology, and Organizational Leadership and Supervision. Having a campus population of about 150 students and a professional and dedicated teaching staff, Purdue in Anderson is armed with the tools necessary to fulfill the mission and goals of the University.<sup>4</sup>

It is essential to be familiar with Purdue's Mission, Goals and Strategies as well. They are, in part, as follows:

#### *Mission*

The mission of Purdue University is to serve the citizens of Indiana, the United States, and the world through **discovery** that expands the realm of knowledge, **learning** through dissemination and preservation of knowledge, and **engagement** through exchange of knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Goals and Strategies*

Goal 3 – Engagement: Effectively address the needs of society through engagement

#### Characteristics:

- Effective partnerships with public and private agencies and organizations as well as among disciplines within the University community to respond to a variety of social, environmental, and economic development needs.
- A vital role for the University in strengthening Indiana's economy and improving the qualifications of the state's workforce.
- Responsive civic engagement that addresses professional development, continuing education, and lifelong learning needs of the citizens of Indiana, the nation, and the world.<sup>6</sup>

#### The Process

This process began with the maintenance of a group of representatives from companies in the surrounding area to offer advice and support to the College. The "Advisory Group" needed a new member or two and since several employees of Red Gold were a part of our campus population, we asked the Human Resource Director, Tim Ingle, to be a part of this group. As Tim began to work within the group, he began to see the value that Purdue Anderson could provide to his organization, he and the location Director, John Eddy, entered into discussions on just exactly what needed to be done to develop the future leaders of Red Gold. Throughout the discussions, it was clear that Red Gold was not interested in the already defined Organizational Development and Supervision (OLS) Certificate. They did not want to "scare" away any potentially worthy employees with an English course and they needed the flexibility to select from a broader range of OLS topics.

It was decided to have a twenty-one credit hour course – dubbed Phase I. The courses selected were:

- OLS 284 Leadership Principles
- OLS 376 Human Resource Issues
- OLS 386 Leadership for Organizational Change
- OLS 388 Leadership Through Teams
- OLS 454 Gender and Diversity
- OLS 477 Conflict Management
- OLS 479 Staffing Organizations

The company selected these courses to provide the knowledge, skills, and abilities believed to benefit the corporation. These were felt to be beneficial not only today but in the future as established in the company's philosophy and guiding principles. They want the employees of the future to understand and be able to apply leadership principles to bring about the best the company can give. These principles include the ability to select the proper people for the job; to know how to treat and respect employees as valuable resources; to know what to do to be able to respond to organizational change quickly and responsibly due to changes in the environment, economy or technology; to work together in teams that are alike in some ways but different in others; to view conflict as a

source of new information and apply resolutions quickly and beneficially; and to be able to staff the organization in an efficient, productive, and profitable way.

In addition, the current Red Gold management team decided to offer the course on company time, showing commitment on the part of the company to the philosophy, principles, and as an end result, the employees. As stated in the Company Philosophy, “The continued success of the Company will be directly related to the greatest efforts of our most valuable resources, our partners in success, our employees.”<sup>3</sup>

### Process Mechanics

Class size was set at 15 to 16 employees from both first and second shifts. Class delivery time needed to be worked out because traditional semesters interfered with “Pack Season”, Red Gold’s busiest time of the year. (Pack Season is from July — October.) By working with the Purdue Business Office, suitable infrastructure changes were made to solve the delivery dilemma. A win/win situation resulted:

- Purdue was allowed to count the student FTEs as regular semester calendar students. To do so, students were admitted to Purdue and registered for the appropriate course(s) by the regular campus deadlines even though the classes didn’t start at the traditional campus semester start times.
- The Purdue Business Office did not invoice Red Gold until the courses were actually delivered.
- Course delivery schedules were built around Pack Season by holding one course in the fall, two courses in the spring and one course in the summer.

The students selected to attend Phase I, now named Certificate of Completion from Red Gold University as delivered by Purdue University, were Team Leaders from various departments and plants at Red Gold. They came from scheduling, plant floor operations, and the maintenance area.

The classes consisted of a mixture of lectures, in-class activities, and real-world problem solving. The in-class activities were varied and included group discussions and experiential learning activities. Each activity included individual tasks and also completing that same task within a subgroup. The subgroups were composed of members from different departments and plants. The purpose of this was to reinforce the effectiveness of consensus decision making as well as working with a group of diverse members. As the subgroups increased in their knowledge and problem solving abilities, they were asked to bring real-world examples into the classroom to use as in-class activities.

The first class of students received the Certificate of Completion on May 5, 2005. Employees and their families were invited to attend the completion ceremony.

## Process Evaluation

As the first group finished the original course work, an evaluation of the program process was made with the discussion about the benefits of extending the program to include coursework in Industrial Technology and Electrical Engineering Technology (Phase II). As a result, the following courses were added. The additional courses met the University's requirements for the Purdue Certificate in Organizational Leadership and Supervision:

- ENGL 106 English Composition
- IT 114 Problem Solving in Manufacturing
- OLS 252 Organizational Behavior
- OLS 274 Applied Leadership
- IT 342 Introduction to Statistical Quality
- IT 381 Total Productive Maintenance
- IT 230\* Elements of Industrial Distribution

Again, the selection of courses match the elements found in the company's philosophy and guiding principles. These selected courses began to merge the "soft-skill" courses (organizational and leadership titles) with those "hard-skill" courses of problems solving, statistics, and productive maintenance. The inclusion of statistics and English composition at this time, were made because by now, the participating employees felt comfortable in the educational environment, knew a bit more about what to expect from a college level course, had experienced success, and were ready to get accolades from the University in the form of a Purdue Certificate Program.

Phase III was developed at the same time. The company felt there were so many benefits involved in this educational process that an agreement was made to continue offering courses on company time for employees to complete the requirements for an Associate of Science degree in Organizational Leadership and Supervision:

- CPT 135 Personal Computing
- OLS 314 Principles of Persuasion
- SOC 100 Introductory Sociology
- MA 153 Algebra and Trigonometry I
- IT 450 Production Cost Analysis
- PSY 120 Elementary Psychology
- COM 114\*\* Fundamentals of Speech Communication

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\* Other suggested courses to meet the Technical Elective requirement included IT 442 Production Planning, IT 281 Industrial Safety, COM 315 Speech Communication of Technical Information, ECET 214 Electricity Fundamentals, and IT 104 Industrial Organization.

\*\* Other suggested courses to meet the Free Elective requirement included ECON 210 Principles of Economics, COM 320 Small Group Communications, COM 315 Speech Communication of Technical Information, OLS 345 Critical Thinking in Organization, and MGT 190B Accounting Principles.

Even though this program is still in its infancy state, it is interesting to note that all but one of the beginning students will be continuing to receive an Associate Degree.

### Process Learnings: Measurement of Success

There are several ways to measure the success of a program such as this. This section looks at instructor feedback, student feedback, and company feedback.

#### *Instructor Feedback*

There were three real-world cases that produced very important results. The first example dealt with one of the students who was very shy and was perceived as standoffish by the other leaders who dealt with this person on a daily basis. After completing the communication and conflict resolution classes, one could begin to see a marked difference in this person and also a change in attitude from the others. This team leader expressed his/her opinion that he/she was now more confident to speak his/her mind, constructively, and felt that he/she was being shown more respect as a result.

The second example involved a supervisor in one of the plants. The problem as seen by several of the team leaders from this facility was the supervisor had no respect for or any inclination to listen to any of the team leaders. They had confronted him/her on different occasions and were basically told that he/she was the boss and if they did not like it they could leave. During class, the teams developed some possible causes for this problem. It was decided to use their newly acquired communication skills to develop specific feedback for the supervisor that detailed what the supervisor was doing, how it was perceived, what the team leaders were feeling as a result of his/her behavior, and recommendations from the team leaders on how their relationship could be improved. Once confronted by the team, the supervisor better understood the team leaders' frustrations, but was having difficulty in modifying his/her behavior. The team leaders agreed to continue giving him/her feedback in an effort to improve not only the relationship, but also the operation of the department.

A third example dealt with one of the students who admitted openly that he had trouble dealing with females in the workplace. He did not respect them and basically felt they had no business in the organization. The diversity course had a most profound effect on this individual. Early on in the course he would try to find ways to confuse the activities by claiming they were skewed to get the desired response. It was only after the completion of a self-awareness survey that he began to change. He stated that he had not realized until that point how prejudiced his beliefs and actions were, and from that point on things changed dramatically. He was more participative in class sessions and more willing to accept the diversity that exists everywhere. The crowning achievement was when



he called to say that he had used the diversity training in a situation on the plant floor and wanted to say thanks for the newly-acquired skills.

### *Student Feedback*

There were two important things that we learned from the students about the delivery of courses. First, it was important to design the delivery with intermittent rewards. In other words, they like completing seven courses and then receiving recognition, completing seven more courses and receiving additional recognition, completing seven more courses and receiving an additional recognition. The second thing was to use a “soft start” approach in selecting what courses to deliver first. Self esteem and success are important for the students to achieve. By placing the math and English requirements towards the end of the program, students felt better about their ability to succeed in college work and were willing to take them.

### *Company Feedback*

The positive feedback from the company came in the form of continued commitment to the employees by continuing to make the program available and continuing to sponsor it on company time. Amie Anderson, human resources manager at Red Gold said the company covers the costs of classes and books because, “It’s a benefit for our employees and helps the company develop leadership talent.”<sup>7</sup>

Red Gold has another smaller facility in Geneva, Indiana. Plans are to begin the education process there in the fall of 2007. Because this facility is smaller, the company may not be able to free up 15-16 people to participate at the same time. But, by working through the engagement process Purdue and Red Gold have agreed to open the enrollment to some surrounding Geneva businesses in order to maintain profitability. In addition, a second group of employees will soon be starting through their educational process at the original plant site in Orestes, Indiana.

### Conclusion

There are many things that companies and universities can do to help each other resulting in a beneficial affect on the economy. However, in order to do so, the company and university must have a shared vision on how to bring this about successfully. It isn’t rare that companies throughout the country see the need to build the knowledge and skill-sets of their employees. Universities can fill that need. By having professors incorporate the company’s business procedures into the course work and even conduct the classes at the company site, the University can aid in developing the leadership talent of the future.

This Red Gold process will act as a model for Purdue-Anderson to use to engage other businesses and industries within the community and surrounding areas. Close attention

will be paid to student and company reaction, feedback, and application as future semesters pass with resulting changes and improvements moved forward into the model. Since Red Gold, Inc., is such an important part of our state's economy and they are seeing success within the company in using this model, the sense is that other business entities would certainly see their results and want to begin to put this model to use for their own benefits.

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