

How purposeful employers transform the lives of employees

Jahaun McKinley personifies how Cascade Engineering's Returning Citizens program for formerly incarcerated individuals changes lives for the better.

"I was 17 years old," McKinley said when recalling the challenges he faced as a black teenager in Michigan. "I wasn't a good rule follower at the time. It was bad decisions upon bad decisions upon bad decisions."

He had spent more than half his life in prison, entering after a felony assault conviction. Whenever he felt hopeless, afraid, and helpless, he withdrew, gave up and made the same mistakes.

"My grandmother was sick leading up to it and it killed me to be in prison and not to help her. When she passed away, I felt like a failure."

While incarcerated, McKinley learned patience and eventually confronted his fears and feelings of inadequacy. He worked on re-creating his life, desperate to get back into society.

"I said, I'm not gonna stop until I know I've been the best person I can be and she can smile down on me like I'm proud of my grandson."

He read hundreds of books about motivated, accomplished people and contrasted himself with them, trying to figure out why they were successful, and he wasn't. He came to believe he could change and become a success.

"I eventually figured out these successful people didn't possess any unique elements within themselves that I didn't have. The difference was they didn't quit. They kept moving forward, even in failure, driving hard, pushing themselves, until they succeeded," McKinley said.

He considered how he could create a clean slate view of the world.

“When we’re learning to walk, we don’t have a reference to look back on. We try, fail, crawl some more, try walking again and keep at it until we learn from our mistakes and ultimately succeed.”

McKinley worked hard at sharing his feelings with others, improving his listening, and adopting a “glass half full” mantra that sounded a mental warning every time he was about to repeat earlier mistakes. “At the heart of every criminal is a quitter. I created an internal alarm system that said, ‘Stop, Jahaun, stop. You’re about to quit. *Don’t do it.*”

When it was time for release from prison, McKinley had reached a new level.

“When they asked me why I should rejoin society, I was able to express myself, share my feelings, and explain what I had done to improve myself and why I was ready. I thought of myself as a child again, a fearless adventurer ready for the world.”

He was thirty-six years old.

Finding a job severely tested McKinley’s optimistic outlook. The only work experience he had was kitchen and janitorial work. Employers couldn’t envision his potential. The spotlight was always on the nearly two decades he had spent in prison.

This time, he didn’t give up.

Finally, one Grand Rapids, Michigan company took a risk and offered him a job. Cascade Engineering turned out to be no ordinary employer. The plastics manufacturer created its “Returning Citizens” program in 2012, having experimented with it as far back as the mid-1990s.

Kenyatta Brame, EVP for Cascade and the individual who drives the program explains its approach and value. “People with criminal backgrounds are one of the most openly discriminated populations. They are also disproportionately people of

color. We call them returning citizens in part because it opens up a very different conversation versus talking about former felons.”

An important lesson learned was giving job candidates a fair chance. Instead of focusing on the past, Cascade evaluates the qualifications of potential new hires first, without the stigma of an arrest or conviction record. Employment applications don’t ask conviction history questions upfront and background checks happen later in the hiring process. Cascade helped pioneer this approach, calling it “move the box.”

McKinley describes the impact this had on his life. “My first day at Cascade, I felt I had arrived. It was my first job. I was willing to do any work because this company had given me a second chance. Most employers wouldn’t even look at a person with a criminal background, so it created an instant sense of loyalty to this company,” said McKinley.

After proving himself as a shop floor worker, McKinley was promoted to a supervisor within one year and then promoted again to a Lean Manufacturing senior manager position.

Along the way, he got married, became a father, and earned an associate's degree in business administration. With Cascade’s encouragement, he visited juvenile systems and spoke with young men about their life course, helping redirect and change their journeys.

“I don’t want to be defined by my prison experiences but by the things I’ve accomplished after I got out of prison.”

McKinley worked for Cascade for over a decade before being hired in 2021 by General Electric as a Lean General Manager. He remains an active spokesperson for Cascade’s Returning Citizens program and will always represent the positive impact of greater purpose.