

Episode 35 - Corey Hickmann - Training Matters At Comfort Matters [00:20:22]

Intro: Welcome to Profiles In Prosperity, the leading podcast for residential service contractors, sponsored by Service Roundtable and hosted by David Heimer.

David Heimer: Hi everybody, this is David Heimer, welcome to Profiles In Prosperity. Corey Hickmann is the owner of Comfort Matters Heating and Cooling, located in Maple Grove, Minnesota. Comfort Matters has enjoyed strong steady growth in sales, profitability, and people. Corey is well respected in our industry, he and his team have won more awards than I can possibly track. But among the long list are several quality Home Comfort Awards, they were named the Service Roundtable Contributor of the Year. They're one of the Inc. 5000 fastest-growing private companies. They won the Service Nation Boundless Benefactor Award, which I think speaks to one of the other wonderful attributes of Corey, that he is generous with his time, and willingly shares ideas and information with others in our industry. Corey is also a Service Nation advisory board mentor. So, Corey Hickmann, welcome to Profiles In Prosperity. To start off with, how did you join our industry?

Corey Hickmann: Well, David thanks for inviting me in here today to do this. The industry start was, I don't know if I was probably a whole lot different than most people. Graduating high school, and didn't really have a career choice at that time, and my brother was already in the industry {inaudible 01:17} and he was working in the industry. So, I went off to a tech school {inaudible 1:22} and checked it out, decided it looked like it made sense, and that's where I enrolled. I have stayed in the industry ever since.

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David Heimer: So, why not a trade school? You went and worked for the train company, isn't that right?

Corey Hickmann: Yeah, I did. So I was in {inaudible 01:35}. I worked at research engineering for training in Lacrosse, and spent some time there, and I kind of thought my route was, I wanted to be on the engineering side, I enjoyed technical things. After spending some time in that kind of environment, it wasn't a fast enough pace for me. So, I ended up moving myself on into the wholesale distribution side. {Inaudible 01:55} with a current distributor, and amongst many other products. So that's where I ended up spending the next 12 years, I guess, doing that before I finally made the switch over to starting Comfort Matters.

David Heimer: And what year did you start Comfort Matters?

Corey Hickmann: It would have been in 2005. I don't remember exactly how it started, but my wife and I were looking at just what happens in the industry, and companies, and some of the ability of what's out there, and we thought we could possibly create something that would make a difference. So, she said go for it, and I said, oh I guess, here we go. And went down to an auction, bought a truck, and then went for it from there.

David Heimer: I like that. Went down to the auction, bought a truck and started the

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business.

Corey Hickmann: Yes, it was a yellow truck. That's how we got yellow in our {cross talk 02:38}.

David Heimer: I remember you use to have yellow trucks, so that was because the first truck you bought was yellow?

Corey Hickmann: Yeah, and it was an old city truck, I believe. It's actually, or probably was, before me, a plow truck or something, but it was yellow. So I started yellow.

David Heimer: It's a good color to start with, very distinctive, there aren't a lot of yellow in our industry, so good choice.

Corey Hickmann: It worked amazingly, I got to say that. I got one yellow truck driving around, and people thought I had 10 of them. So, I said, I'm going to stick with this bold color thing and we still are pretty bold {inaudible 3:07} colors until today.

David Heimer: So, your wife Amy, the lovely and charming Amy, I should say as well. Is she in your business day to day?

Corey Hickmann: So she's been a lot more in the past year, as we've kind of grown and moved into a new location here last year. So she's been putting a lot more help on

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the office side, so, as we've been hiring CSRs, anything on the office environment side, she's been assisting a lot on different items there.

David Heimer: Okay. So there's a lot of stuff we could talk about. I mean, I think your company is an excellent example of so many different things. But there's one thing that I heard you talking about, not too long ago, that I thought was really fascinating and a good item for us to talk about. You do a lot of technical training with your team. But what I find even more interesting than that is, you do a lot of non-technical training that really has nothing to do with our business or even our industry. But it helps your team out with their personal lives, could you tell us about that training and why you do it?

Corey Hickmann: Yeah, over time of just actually spending time through different Service Roundtable events, listening to other companies that are kind of moving and growing. I started to find a trend that retaining good technicians and good people required more than just providing a job. We have to kind of try to create something that also affects their lives. A lot of times, I think we find people end up in this field because sometimes they didn't exactly know where they're going to go, or what they're going to do, or maybe they didn't have a lot of, some of this education available to them. So, we do training anywhere from two to three days a week, usually on the minimum side. When we start adding in one of the days, we call our life training days. The first one we started out with with the book, Five Love Languages, which was quite amusing. That morning we, all the technicians sitting in the room, and I bought copies of the books for

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everybody, and they came in and they're all looking at that book.

David Heimer: Oh, dear.

Corey Hickmann: Yeah.

David Heimer: I'm not sure I'm going to be comfortable talking about this, right. That's what they were thinking.

Corey Hickmann: Yeah, lots of blank, weird stares at that time. And I just asked, I said, everybody's here with me on this? It's an easy read, they open up the book, and they see that it had a lot of whitespaces, so at least it wasn't overly difficult. And I said, we're going to go through this slowly, and we did over five weeks. And we just picked one for each week, and we assigned it for the week, they went home and read it, and then, that next week, I would have my notes and then we discussed that particular one. And we're able to tie this into not only just, of course, our personal lives, because some of these guys are married, some have girlfriends, and some have nothing. And it was amazing how there's a lot of home reaction, spouses, girlfriends are like, why are you reading this? And many of them actually ended up reading the book with their husbands. And throughout the process of engaging, I've had two guys get engaged. I have no idea if there's any connection to that, but it was kind of funny. It ended up going extremely well, and it was quite shocking. So I was constantly looking to continue to do other things like

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this.

David Heimer: So, you said the results were good. But what would you say the results were? Was there anything you could point to?

Corey Hickmann: Well, I think it all went back to, is if we couldn't keep some happiness in the home, it affects the workday a lot. It can just now affect everybody in the office, affect our customers. And the other thing, actually, that helped us start to understand the relationship between not everybody's the same. And we use a lot of this personality training between people. But we understand that not everybody's wired the same. We just think this is how I think, everybody must think like me. And that was a book that kind of started to open up their eyes that, hey, we're different, but that's okay. There's nothing wrong with being different, and that was a big piece and {inaudible 6:46} for us. And I think we carry that book into, after that it was, Great Advance, by Ken Blanchard, I believe. That was the next book I think we went into, same thing we broke it down, over like four or five weeks, officially broke the company into two halves. So, my wife, Amy led the one, and I led the other one. And we went through every section of that book, we read one week and then discussed it, and that's a book that just opens your eyes to amazing customer service. And that was one of our ultimate goals.

David Heimer: How often do you do this? So if you're training, I think you said three days a week, so one day is personal development of those days?

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Corey Hickmann: Yeah, we kind of tried to actually make that Mondays. So Monday mornings, we have personal development day, and we've added on other things since that. The funny part is how it's books, because I personally, never read books through high school, grad school. And it was, I'm going to say actually, I was at a Comfort Tech in Baltimore, I believe that was. I don't remember the exact year, it was somewhere around 6, 7, 8 years ago. And I was sitting in a lobby, and someone came up to me and {inaudible 07:48} and was an author that was speaking there. And then the conversation came up about reading books, and he handed me his book, he said, next time we run into each other, sometimes, you're going to tell me about the book. And I was like, I've never read a book before. So I ended up reading it. And it kind of was the start off, of finding that this is what I needed to do. I needed to try to educate myself in other ways.

David Heimer: What was the book?

Corey Hickmann: That particular book was, A Simple Choice.

David Heimer: A Simple Choice.

Corey Hickmann: It was A Simple Choice, which was a great book. The second book I believe I read was Freedom For Fear. So that was kind of mind-opening, you know, I got to share this with some other guys, and about what book reading kind of does. So, like I mentioned, we start off with The Five Love Languages. Went on to Raving Fans,

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and we went on to one called, \$6,000 Eggs, another customer service book, easy to read again. Something that doesn't overwhelm you and intimidate a person that doesn't maybe read a lot. Went through that book with great results again. So now when new people come to the company, they get prescribed books after reading Raving Fans, one for example. It's actually really easy for me to do it a second time. So I read the book so many times now and I have all my notes done, I can sit down with them. But I got to say, that's certainly a big changing training we did recently was, Financial Peace University by Dave Ramsey.

David Heimer: Oh, yeah.

Corey Hickmann: I was wanting to do this for many years because I personally went through the program after maybe 4 or 5 years ago. And it's made a huge difference on our financial stability, and allowed us to be able to just take {inaudible 09:16} our money and eliminate debt. But I was always a little hard on, you know, the program, if I can bring it in, how people would accept it, and how they would go with it. Finally, I started talking about it a little bit and I got some positive reception during our company meetings. So, I started to lead up with how much of an issue debt is in life, and how it's more common to be in debt than it is the other way. And finally, I said okay, here's the program. I want to do this, show them some videos, who wants to join? And everybody signed up.

David Heimer: So you made it voluntary, but everybody thought it was a good idea and

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went for it?

Corey Hickmann: Everybody signed up. Now the program had a fee at a cost, and we had to buy the program, buy the books, and things like that. And I believe those were around \$150 a set. So what we did is, we passed it through payroll deduction, we just bought them upfront and then allowed them to pay for that. And everyone did it, we would set it up on Monday mornings again. We started off, I think it was around 7:00 am. And I would try to provide some sort of breakfast, all sorts of different plates, try to make it different every week, some sort of food. And then we went to the program, which was a nine-week program. And throughout it, it gets a little bit personal, because we talk about not really sale-specific financial things. But the program does talk about credit cards.

And we had people cutting up credit cards, and getting rid of credit cards. People developing savings, one of the goals out of the program is to have at least three to four months' worth of living expenses in your checking account, which is a great thing when you can get it. And now I've talked to people every few weeks, I'll bring it up again, you know, how's it going? You know, don't forget about this section, don't forget about that section. And I had one of our dispatchers in the office, just even telling me the other day, they had two major vehicle failures. I remember a transmission and something else and said it probably cost 1000s of dollars, but we had the money in the bank {inaudible 11:04} and this sells really well.

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David Heimer: Yeah, if people have a stable home, and a stable financial picture at home as well, it just makes their stability at work better. It means they're able to focus at work, and it means they're not going to be looking around to leave you for 50 cents an hour or something ridiculous like that.

Corey Hickmann: No, that's exactly it. I mean, it also makes them better community members, better citizens, better parents. So we've been trying to figure out other things that can make a difference. So I was speaking to some people and we started to come up with, to add to the book. But now it got to a point where I had to start to specialize sometimes a little bit, depending on where people are at in life or perhaps as far as you know, maybe with kids, with marriage, or where they are in our company, are they in management, are they kind of get to management. And so we started doing a few of them.

And one of the leading books that probably kind of we lead off with is, The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership, by John Maxwell. Probably one of my most favorite books ever.

And what I'll do actually is, not too long ago with one particular technician, I said, you're driving every day, you're going from call to call, and we want to help advance you. Let's get audible, put it on your phone, plug it into your truck, and it's listening to this book, from call to call. He went through the book of leaders five times in about a month. Twice in the first week, technicians have more downtime than you realize {cross talk 12:30}.

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David Heimer: That wasn't my takeaway. My takeaway was, he really likes that book.

Corey Hickmann: Exactly! 100% on, I mean, he truly liked the book. It was very eye-opening on so many parts of it and we spent so much time, and I was super guilty with this forever, you know, listening to certain morning radio talk shows that honestly, don't do anything for my brain, that probably makes my brain weaker.

David Heimer: Good point.

Corey Hickmann: And I was like, I need to go and search for something different. And there was a particular one we started off with, a couple of other people I've been working with have done Ron Smith's book, HVAC Spells Wealth.

David Heimer: Oh yeah, the survival of our industry.

Corey Hickmann: Jim Rowan, we read some particular ones by him. Zig Ziglar, he's got a bunch of great ones. And I actually stepped into this one a little bit later in the people, but it's called, Today Matters, and that's also by John Maxwell. And the funny part is, how Comfort Matters came to its name, I actually leave that to my wife, Amy, she had the book, it was given to her by someone through Mary Kay. And Today Matters is a book that talks about, what are your values in life, family, business, etc, and culture, and all those. And that was a big piece of Comfort Matters, that's how it got its

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name.

David Heimer: Wow! What a great story. I want to go back to a couple of things, rewind for just two questions. The first is in the Financial Peace University, and I've always wondered this, you're sitting around with people that you know, that you work with, and there's a fair amount of financial discussion there, isn't there? And is it really uncomfortable to have these discussions with the people that you work with? I've seen you're avoiding subjects, like how much money you make. But, there are other things, you know, what's the debt situation that I have? How do you guys address that kind of stuff?

Corey Hickmann: You know, that's a great piece because one of the things that I've seen happen to us over the last years, two years here, and training does a lot about what has changed us. The more we started training, I was always on this one piece that says, I have to dispatch the guy for the job first, I can't let him come in the office and try to do that. And that's great to control, but there's a certain point where they feel a little alienated, just driving around in a truck all day. When we started bringing them in for more training in the office, technically it started with, they started to gel with each other. They started to like each other, started to cross each other more, I mean, do they still disagree with things? Of course, but, so there was a little bit more of a family feel started happening.

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If you've never done training at all, and you tried to roll out without one of those two, it would probably be a little cold, but {inaudible 15:03} program gives you a great leader's guide, which helps you navigate those problems. Because technically, the course is designed for strangers, designed for stranger groups, and in churches as well, it was designed for originally. But the questions that we'll get on to, like there's one point early in the program where everybody writes down how many credit cards you have. How much liquid cash you have, and how much debt you have. That was done anonymously, it's turned into myself, as the leader, and then I tally the total dollars, and then give it to the group. You know, we have 100 credit cards and this month's debt {inaudible 15:34}

David Heimer: You were not identifying the individuals?

Corey Hickmann: Correct, we just put on a piece of paper, and that's where it goes with that. But what I ended up finding is, people were more open than I expected. When we would talk with the eyes, you know, we start off the next class, we were like, hey, what's happened since last week when we did this last video? Then I'd have people call me and say, this is the first time I've ever saved this much money, or this is the first time I've ever done this. And they were more open than I expected, that's actually refreshing.

David Heimer: Yeah, I mean, I just think those programs are fantastic.

Corey Hickmann: The big part of that, is that you got to have a little bit of a training

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mentality probably put into your company, which makes others more accepting of it versus just to start off like that.

David Heimer: So the second question, you're now telling me that you are kind of creating individualized training? You're suggesting this particular tech, I'd like you to listen to this John Maxwell tape. Is that in addition to the other training that he's doing?

Corey Hickmann: Yes, it is. So that will become my sort of more one-on-one, where we get a little bit more personal, where a technician may describe to me specific difficulties that they're dealing with, maybe at home, or could be raising kids or things like that. And I'm not like a doctor, no family matters here by any means. Maybe I've had enough of my own problems so I've read and chased enough stuff that I know what to share. But I hear, and they kind of tend to come to us, and {inaudible 17:02} just try to find things that, or I'll reach out to other people I know and try to find something that will possibly impact their life in a positive way. I mean, there's one book for men, it's called, Wild At Heart, you wouldn't believe the impacts a book like that can make.

David Heimer: You know I'm thinking about the whole arc of this thing, sometime after you started the company, never read a book before in your life, you get a book, you start reading it, it opens your eyes. You're now at the point where you've read so many books, and you're passing them on to other people and you're assigning them to people in your company to read. That's an amazing transformation.

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Corey Hickmann: I've heard it so many times that five years from today, you're going to be the exact same person, except for the people you've met and the books you read.

The only two things that can ever change your life. And well, I have some {inaudible 17:53} of meeting people and using Roundtable type events, things like that. But then the books, the other side of that, they kind of go hand in hand. And when that seems to happen, I sit down, I talk to a smart person, always a book comes out of their mouth, and I'm like, there's a connection here.

David Heimer: That's such a great place to end, but I wanted to ask, is there anything more you want to tell us about the training that you do?

Corey Hickmann: The biggest thing is planning ahead with it, and we stay consistent with it. No matter how the seasons go on, we hit the peak of summer, we may start to lower some of the training time a little bit but we still do it. And even some of those training, when it's really hot or really cold out kind of season, sometimes we'd just bring them in the mornings for inside training, and maybe it's just a Roundtable event. Okay, let's talk about the most difficult service call you had this week, each person went around on, and how do you handle it? Or what did you need to do? And that in the zone has been a big piece. But then, the other thing is just the follow-up, I'll use a personal text message here and there or an email, you have to really care about the person and if you do truly care, they will see it.

David Heimer: Yeah, it's funny. We started this out with you saying when I'm able to

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help people with their personal lives it impacts how well they perform at work. But the reality is, that the satisfaction you get from it, I can tell from talking with you it's not the satisfaction of people performing better at work. What you're getting is the satisfaction of helping people and improving their lives, aren't you?

Corey Hickmann: Exactly. Because that's what we do internally here, to kind of pass it on to our customers, we really care about each other here. People take care of our customers the same way, and many of them appreciate it and I think that's the kind of word that spreads and allows us to continue double-digit growth, year after year.

David Heimer: Thank you so much for doing this with me, I'm really impressed with what you've accomplished and what you're doing for your team. That's great!

Corey Hickmann: Yep. I appreciate you bringing me here and hope you have a great day.

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