

EXCEPTIONAL SERVICE: NORDSTROM TAKES CUSTOMER SERVICE TO THE NEXT LEVEL

canadian
auto dealer

MARCH 2016



Generations of
SUCCESS

Meet the Clarks, the proud dealership family that just celebrated 100 years running Canada's oldest Chevrolet dealership, J. Clark and Son Ltd. in Fredericton, N.B. How did they do it?

PM #42134512

An ongoing investment

Well-trained technicians are the backbone of a successful fixed ops department

BY HEATHER HUDSON



Not a day goes by that Philip Poon doesn't prioritize training for his fixed operations staff.

From conducting five-minute one-on-ones, to weekly 15-minute team meetings, to grabbing a celebratory lunch for a technician who just completed a training course, Poon's mind is often on learning opportunities — past, present and future.

"We do training every day with our advisors... it takes time, but it pays off in huge dividends," said Poon, Fixed Operations Manager at Harris Victoria Chrysler Dodge in Victoria, B.C.

Whether it's gaining insight into customers, cross-training on other aspects of the business or focusing on technician-training from Chrysler, Poon's staff are always learning. He said it's one of the reasons for last year's banner sales.

Poon's approach isn't unusual. Many fixed operations departments

at dealerships ensure continuous education for their service advisors and technicians.

Most OEMs provide e-learning programs, videos and in-class training for dealer employees to keep them abreast of changes.

Honda Canada's Training Division, for example, provides a comprehensive curriculum for fixed operations roles, such as service advisors and technicians.

The number and topics of training courses depend on the job, but they are extensive. To reach the top level of certification in 2015 as a Honda auto technician, there were 211 required courses to complete.

Honda uses various training formats, including instructor-led, self-paced e-learning or distance learning. Informal training tools such as job aids and videos are also available.

In addition to regular fixed operations training, other OEMs, like GM Canada,

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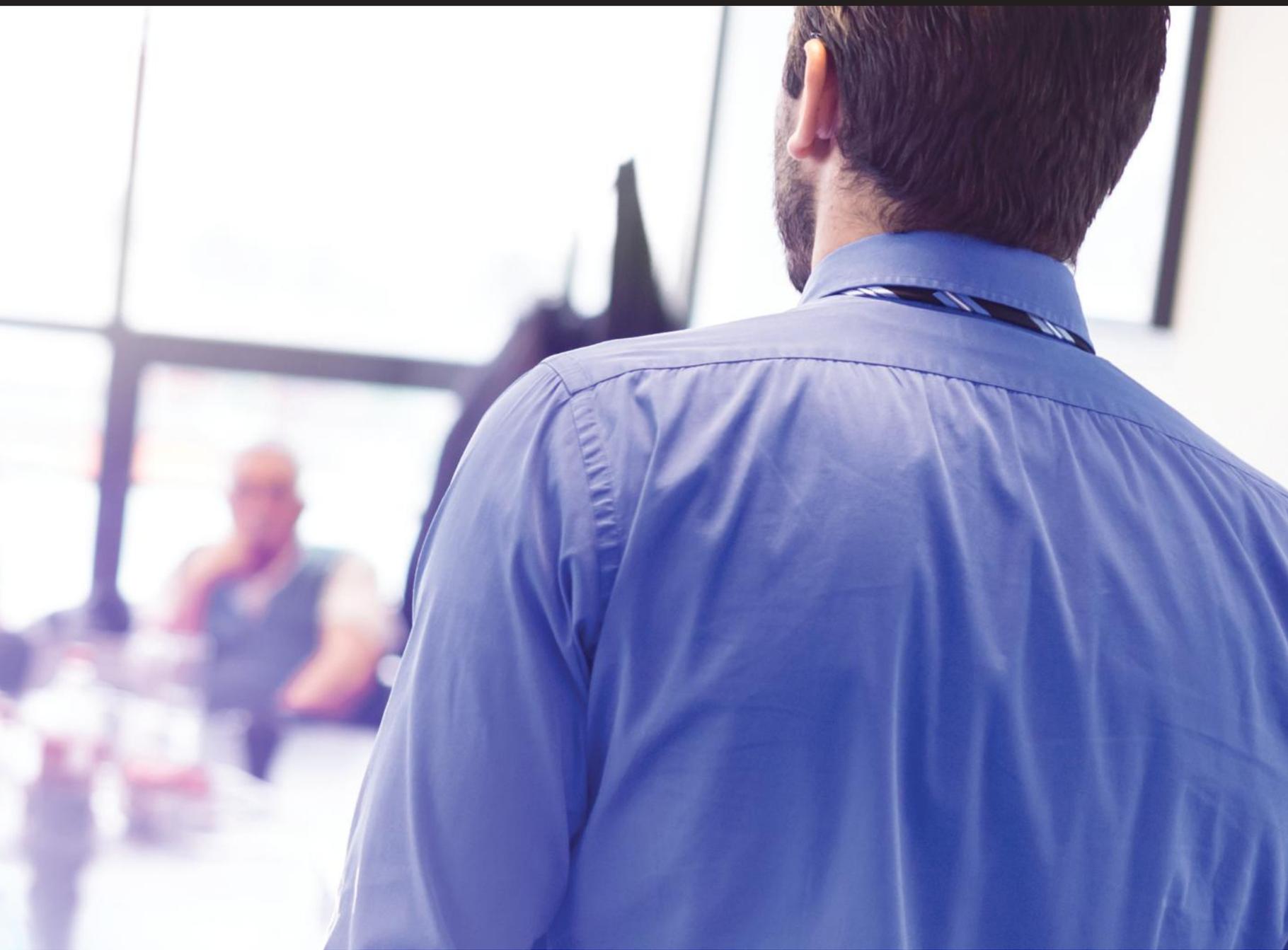
run specialized training programs for would-be technicians, even securing paid apprenticeship positions in GM dealerships as part of the certificate.

The GM Automotive Services Educational Program trains students in diagnostic and repair techniques on GM vehicles over a two-year period. The program runs on a rotational basis with eight weeks in the classroom and eight weeks of hands-on, paid work experience in a GM dealership.

Grooming young technicians is not strictly the domain of OEMs. Fixed operations departments in some dealerships boast well-trained and loyal technicians simply by investing in them when they're still gaining skills.

Antoine Thibodeau, service manager at Bel-Air Toyota in Ottawa, Ont. oversees 20 technicians, and said many of them got their start in the dealership as high school co-op students.

"We're always open to taking students in [to learn]. From day one,



we make sure they're hands on and understand the dynamics of what we do here. We want them to participate and learn. If they demonstrate an interest, once they finish their co-op program, we sponsor them as they get their schooling from the Ministry of University and Colleges and we hire them as apprentices."

This kind of training has long been a strategy for Thibodeau, who has built relationships with teachers in area schools. "I usually get the best pick of the crop because I know all the teachers and I spend time with the students in the [school] shop."

Beyond the ministry's requirements, Toyota Canada offers online courses and in-class learning at Toyota University. The carmaker requires a four-step training program, some of which can be done in tandem with completing a college certificate.

Thibodeau said he ensures his apprentices and technicians are

completing their ministry and Toyota educations.

"It takes about three years [to finish the college certificate] and you can do the Toyota training at the same time. [Technicians] are usually finished with the Toyota training before completing the apprenticeship, but once you get to [Toyota's] Step 3, you have to be a licensed technician to move on," said Thibodeau.

Like other OEMs, Toyota offers courses year-round to help technicians keep up with new models and technology. "The average technician might take two days of full classes at Toyota University and 20-30 hours of online learning per year," says Thibodeau.

Though training is an expectation in his department, Thibodeau says staff are usually motivated by the hourly wage increases for each Toyota step completed.

Besides wage increases, how do

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fixed operations managers keep staff motivated to learn?

Poon says he takes his employees for a team-building dinner every once in a while, offers regular feedback on a job well done and does the occasional Starbucks run — his treat.

Lindsay Williams, Fixed Operations Manager at Heartland Ford Sales Inc. in Fort Saskatchewan, Alta., said she takes the training herself.

"Leading by example is important. I have a wall of my certificates to show I do it, so it's clear we do [training] as a team and work together."

A well-trained fixed operations department means a more efficient operation and customer satisfaction. Thibodeau said supporting employees' training also leads to other benefits.

"When [employees] realize we care about them enough to put them through their levels, they usually stay for years...usually when we lose a technician here it's because he retires."