

Jim Edwards



In 1989, Jim Edwards and Spencer Industries earned the Triple Crown of top Indiana business awards. The well-deserved recognition also led to an introduction to the Indiana Chamber, which has benefited from Edwards' expertise ever since.

A Tennessee native and University of Tennessee graduate (maybe that's where the "volunteer" spirit comes from), Edward led the formation of Spencer Industries in Dale, Indiana in 1981. Eight years later Edwards was the U.S. Small Business Administration's Indiana Small Business Person of the Year and an Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year winner. The company, a national leader in custom thermoforming of plastics, was presented the first Indiana Award for Global Competitiveness.

The Santa Claus, Indiana resident was invited to be the keynote speaker at the Indiana Chamber's annual Human Resources Conference. The late Lee Cross, an attorney with Ice Miller and chairman of the Chamber that year, approached Edwards after his presentation and inquired about his involvement with the Chamber. Cross told Edwards, "You can consider yourself on the board right now."

Why did Spencer Industries earn the illustrious trio of awards? What moved Cross to immediately recognize the value Edwards could bring to the Chamber and its members?

Being the best

In short, the answer is innovative approaches and operational excellence. Edwards was a pioneer, practicing Total Quality Management (TQM) before it became commonplace. Statistical process control (SPC), employee stock ownership and gain sharing plans helped Spencer Industries achieve its high levels of success.

It wasn't difficult, Edwards says, to implement the new concepts. "You have a few naysayers, but you give them the opportunity to turn it around. If they don't, you make some hard decisions."

The naysayers are limited and the cooperation is increased through consistent communication efforts.

"I always kept my employees totally informed. You have to tell them the good news and the bad. If it's bad, tell them what you are going to do about it," he offers. "To have high credibility, you have to be honest. If you do that, (employees) will stick with you to the hilt."

Before (and during) his successful business career, Edwards benefited from military experience. His four years of active duty in the Navy included a stint on the staff of John S. McCain II, a four-star admiral and the father of the current U.S. senator from Arizona. Edwards also enjoyed a long career in the U.S. Naval Reserves.

"His (Sen. McCain's) father was a tremendous influence on me from a leadership perspective," Edwards asserts. "There's no place where you can get more responsibility at an early age than the military. That's when we had a draft and (a wide range in the abilities of those serving). The melding of all those people together was really a challenge."

Building success

Edwards started anew with Spencer Industries and in several of his previous management posts. He also brings experience in turning around struggling operations to the consulting business he operates today. Small to midsize manufacturers continue to benefit from his know-how and vision.

It's in the area of workforce development that Edwards has made significant contributions at several levels. In two separate stints, he has chaired the Chamber's workforce development committee through all but two years of its existence. He has also led the state's workforce proficiency panel since its inception.

"Jim will do whatever it takes to assist the Chamber and the state's business community," notes David Holt, Chamber vice president of workforce development policy and federal relations. "His years of experience at leading companies are invaluable as we strive to upgrade Indiana's workforce development performance."

Edwards explains, "In the old days, a high school degree was good enough. Today, you can't get there unless you have the technical skills. A lot of people in the workforce today don't have the skills or the literacy levels to acquire new skills. That's why this workforce literacy study is one of the best things the Chamber has done in recent years.

Edwards has been a member of the advisory team for the ongoing *Employer-based Workforce*

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Three-hour trips from Santa Claus to Indianapolis don't deter Jim Edwards from extensive involvement with the Chamber and other organizations.

By Tom Schuman

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Literacy Project. The recently completed Phase I will lead to pilot programs that address literacy concerns in the workplace.

Participating in such efforts allows him to take away as much as he gives, Edwards contends.

“I involve myself in a lot of things because it’s so important to create strong networks,” he notes. “If you give to people, they generally share with you. It’s a great reward to come together with the great minds the Chamber is able to bring here. Collectively, we’re able to take the Chamber (and Indiana companies and their employees) onward and upward.”

Current focus

Of his many experiences and volunteer activities over the years, Edwards is particularly encouraged by the Southern Indiana Network for Education (SINE). The organization has been successful in enhancing the capabilities of adult learning centers, turning them into the much-desired lifelong learning and readiness facilities.

That success has evolved into an Edwards-led project in Spencer County that he strongly believes could be a model for the state. An engineering and advanced management technology academy in the two high schools will prepare students for either the workforce or additional educational opportunities. The goal is to eventually make that training accessible to adult learners and incumbent workers.

“This is the way to build the skill base very rapidly,” Edwards states. “We have such a graying of the workforce to contend with. If you look at the demographics, it’s a frightening thing.”

Edwards plans to be there to help with the solutions. Although he’s working mostly with clients a little closer to home and his wife is urging him to slow down, the 67-year-old says, “I’ll never completely retire. I’m too much of a ‘do it’ kind of guy. I enjoy all the things I do and the relationships I have.

“I’m a firm believer in giving back. I want to help others, help build communities and help build this state.”