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New CEO set to change culture of Wheeling-Pitt

By VICKI SMITH

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MINGO JUNCTION, Ohio (AP) - Four decades ago, the new chief executive officer of Wheeling Pittsburgh Corp. was a rookie in the world of steel, learning there were two ways to manage people.

John Goodwin's first supervisor at U.S. Steel Corp. subscribed to a "rule by fear" strategy. The second boss promised the secret to survival: "Don't do anything, and you won't do anything wrong."

Then along came Jack Walter, the man who would become a lifelong mentor.

"People are going to be your strength," he told the young Goodwin.

Goodwin is 63 now, and he never forgot. As the first new CEO at Wheeling-Pitt in nine years, he is cobbling together a like-minded team.

Esmark Inc., the Chicago Heights, Ill.-based steel distribution company that seized control of Wheeling-Pitt last fall, tapped Goodwin in part for his willingness to jump into the trenches.

Believing it will take hands-on effort to turn around a twice-bankrupt steel company, Goodwin camps out in an unremarkable office at the Mingo Junction mill.

Two months into the job, he has yet to set foot inside the corporate headquarters in West Virginia. He won't, he says, until the electric arc furnace is making 30 batches of steel a day.

The man charged with making that happen is Mark Trapp, who left a pipe foundry in New Jersey to run the furnace.

"The most exciting thing about working with John is he doesn't tell you how to do it. He just tells you what to do," says Trapp, whose career includes stints with Mittal Steel Co., International Steel Group Inc. and Nucor Corp.

Trapp was recruited as an outsider, too, but he says he has been embraced by workers unaccustomed to managers who listen.

"I almost liken it to taking the lid off a pressure cooker. These guys have just been steaming all these years, and I've just let them loose," he says. "They see they can control their own destiny."

Tom Modrowski, former chief operating officer of Esmark and the new president of Wheeling-Pitt, will someday succeed Goodwin.

"We have different responsibilities, and no one is more important than the other one," he says. "This isn't unlike a team. Everyone's depending on the other guy to do his job. ... We're going to walk down the road arm in arm."

Dave McCall, director of Columbus-based District 1 of the United Steelworkers, says that's not just talk.

"A lot of my guys have never been to top management meetings. Now, the same time John Goodwin is interviewing the guy to run the steelmaking unit, our guys are interviewing him, too," he says.

McCall has known Goodwin and Esmark CEO James Bouchard for more than 20 years. They met at U.S. Steel's Gary Works plant in Indiana, and his experience with them is a key factor in the union's support for the Esmark takeover.

Goodwin understands steelmaking, from melting to finishing, and has a plan that he is personally laying out for 3,100 workers in Ohio, West Virginia and Pennsylvania, McCall says.

"That's new, and different from what Wheeling-Pitt's used to," he says.