Several years ago, I visited a manufacturing plant in Florida, which had the best quality and productivity metrics in its division. My client and I were there to learn what the facility was doing right so we could apply those management techniques at other facilities. As the plant manager took us on the tour, he pointed out an hourly employee working on his machine. “See Ted there?” the plant manager asked. “He’s been with us for more than twenty years, doing the same job year after year. You might not think Ted’s got much to offer, because he’s just a manufacturing worker. He has no interest in being promoted. He leaves work as soon as his shift is over. But Ted knows more about his machine and that manufacturing line than anyone. And when we initiated an exercise last year to make that line more efficient, Ted had the best ideas for how to improve things. Afterward, I bought him a cup of coffee and asked why he had never made those suggestions before. ‘Those college-educated production managers are so sure they have the answers, all they do is tell me what to do,’ Ted told me. ‘They never ask what I think.’

The plant manager shook his head. “What a waste of brainpower,” he said. Then he smiled. “Want to know my secret? It’s Ted, and the other eight hundred employees at this plant. If I respect Ted and listen to him, we’ll be successful.”