



‘CHANGING THE VISION’— STAFF BUY-IN CRITICAL FOR SAFETY

Mission’s Eureka, CA, plant—winner of TRSA’s ‘15 Safety recognition—showcases teamwork in incident prevention

By Jack Morgan

The goal of running a safe commercial laundry largely comes down to communication...and especially how management and hourly staff view their respective roles in avoiding workplace injuries. In 2009, when Dennis Pieper accepted the general manager’s post at Mission Linen’s Eureka plant in Northern California, it had the worst safety record in the company.

Today, safety at the Eureka plant has improved dramatically. In fact, by the time of *Textile Services’* recent visit to the facility, it enjoyed the regional chain’s best safety record. Pieper credits this turnaround to his team’s emphasis on three objectives: empowering employees to

prevent incidents; demonstrating the company’s commitment to protecting staff; and applying a multifaceted strategy to drive home the safety message in various ways. Examples of the latter have ranged from handing out jackets with the company’s logo to allowing employees to souse their bosses—including Pieper—in a dunk tank or throw pies at them during on-site companywide safety day celebrations.

“If I had to go back and look at this from what they were doing until what we do now, it was changing the vision,” says Pieper, whose team earned TRSA’s Safety Innovation Award in 2015. “I took this approach, ‘Hey Joe, you’re so important to us as a person, as an employee. I need you every day.’

“It’s also my job, personally, to make sure at the end of the day, I send you home to your spouse, your family in the same condition or better than when you came. We cannot afford to have you injured at work. I’ll do my very best to protect you, so you can still be a provider for your family, your children.”

SAFETY—EMPHASIS ON INVOLVEMENT

Words like those cited above can have a positive impact on employees, but they’ll fall flat quickly if the company doesn’t back its rhetoric with action. “It’s one thing for me to talk about it, and then walk out of a meeting and do nothing about it,” Pieper says. “It’s do and show what I say. Let the actions work for the verbal. I can sell anybody on anything in a meeting.” He adds that the effort will fail, “If I don’t do the things, if I don’t follow up and have a reward for them, or a pat on the back, or post the number, or do that type of thing.” Positive recognition includes the aforementioned jackets, plus banners with safety slogans and other recognition programs, along with an array of incentives such as gift cards for route service representatives who score 85% or above in their GPS-monitored trucks (see related story, pg. 30).

Pieper is careful with monetary incentives. He knows that improperly designed programs can encourage staff to underreport injuries. “That’s always on my mind,” he says, noting that no one

wants to be the one who requires a reset of the board in the plant that displays the number of days the facility has gone without an injury (1,221 days at the time we visited). “They put the board up there and have created peer pressure. They don’t want to report it.”

Pieper attacks this problem by reminding his staff of 48 people that safety trumps everything else. Nothing should stand in the way of their well-being—least of all a focus on setting records for enhancing safety. If an employee has a minor sprain or similar injury, management may shift that person to another job with less repetitive motion. But the message is clear: “Don’t be afraid if something happens,” he says to staff. “Tell us right away, and we’re going to deal with it. Each situation is different. There’s going to be a day that, that number’s going to go off the board. That’s just real world.”

Keeping employees engaged in the safety program helps them to understand and appreciate this objective. The plant operates a safety committee and seven subcommittees that include hourly staff and managers from every department. At regular meetings (including one we witnessed on the day we visited), attendees discuss safety concerns as well as creative ways to recognize the staff’s record on incident prevention. In fact, ideas such as the dunk tank often emerge from these discussions. “Five years ago, it was good to have barbecues, but that’s old stuff,” Pieper says. “What do they want to do now? We try to keep it fresh. Sitting in a safety subcommittee we ask them, 14 people, ‘I’m thinking about doing something. Give me some ideas.’ By involving employees in the process, plant management helps them feel that they’re part of the program, not just following orders, he says. “Now, we’ve got 15 minds

thinking. We’ll take it back to the team and ask them what they would like to do. Involve them.”

The pie-throwing contest was one product that emerged from a brainstorming session. The event served as part of Mission’s companywide safety day in June, four years ago. Staff modified a disused truck, and managers stood behind a hole in the door to receive their shots. “We bought the pie tins,” Pieper says. “Filled them full of whipped cream. We, as managers, got behind that with our faces sticking through the hole. They all got to take shots at us. We had it tilted, and we kneeled down there.”

It’s hard to top pie throwing for getting employees engaged, but the dunk tank also was a huge hit with staff, he says. “One of the safety days, we all said, ‘What do we want to do? We’ve got two,

BELOW: (clockwise from top/left) Here is a view of the plant’s chemical-injection system; one of the plant’s two boilers; Slings are lined up beside one of the plant’s washer/extractors. On the opening page, an employee inspects flatwork coming off of the folding equipment at left.





ABOVE: A washer/extractor used for small lots or specialty items; a computer monitor displays production information in real time; finished garments await delivery to customers; employees sort soiled goods prior to washing.

three options. They wanted to do a dunk tank. We went and rented a dunk tank down here at the party rental store, filled it up.” Since the event was held in February, 80° water from a tempered tank was pumped into the tank and every employee got a chance to dunk the boss. “You could put me down in there and soak me and my other managers,” Pieper says. “There was a lot of bantering going on. It was a fun day for the people. Who knows what the next one will be?”

MANAGEMENT BACKING

While staff members enjoy adding levity to their safety program, Pieper makes it clear that incident prevention is a serious challenge that takes the full effort of everyone in the plant. He tells his team that any staff member, regardless of position, is authorized to call out any other employee or manager that’s seen doing anything that violates the plant’s safety rules. “One of the things that I stress is I’ve given everybody a badge to be a safety cop in here,” Pieper says. “We hold ourselves accountable. Even though you might just be a peer of the person working next to you, or you’re 20 feet away, be a leader.”

He adds that plant policy is, “If you see someone doing the wrong thing, please ask them to stop, ‘That’s not how we do it, that’s in an unsafe mode.’ They have that authority to approach any person in here. Below you, or above you, it does not matter.”

When employees look out for each other, it helps everyone prevent incidents, he says. “If they do not respond to you and just shut you off, then you immediately go to their supervisor and identify it to them. Then it’s their job to take care of it. I repeat that over and over again. Please, be the eyes for us to keep everybody safe.”

When an incident or “near miss” does occur, it’s brought up to the Safety Committee along with a rotating list of monthly topics, such as machine guarding, driving in foggy conditions and others, Pieper says. These meetings are documented and signed off on by each

attende. Minutes are kept in a three ring binder and audited annually by corporate management, Pieper says. “That’s all part of Mission’s safety program. It’s documented because it’s part of our annual audit when the internal auditors come in. We have to show a record of the 12 months of topics and everybody signed off on it. There’s a full back end of accountability outside of my plant that they want every plant to take. Then that comes out in your final plant audit score. That goes to the president and the board of directors of the company.”

The emphasis that Mission’s corporate leadership places on safety reinforces the need for incident prevention at the plant level, Pieper says. And that’s good news for Mission Eureka because it operates in a 92-year-old building where staff process a mix of industrial and food-and-beverage items in a relatively small space. We got a closer look at the facility during a walk-through of the plant.

PLANT TOUR

Located in a residential neighborhood, Mission Eureka has operated this plant

since 1952. The building was constructed in 1925. As noted, at the time we visited, the plant had gone 1,221 days without a lost-time accident. When Pieper started as general manager in 2009, the plant had experienced 13 safety-related incidents in the previous 10 months. Pieper credits the plant’s enhanced focus on teamwork and additional safety awareness with a dramatic reduction in incidents. The plant’s revenue also increased by 42% during the same period. While the economic recovery surely fueled this growth, improved employee morale and productivity related to the safety improvements was a likely contributing factor.

Long known for its timber industry, Eureka and surrounding Humboldt County have diversified economically in recent years with an emphasis on tourism, including both beaches and the nearby historic redwood forests. “This is the only place in the world where the redwoods meet the ocean,” Pieper says. He also quips that in some quarters Humboldt is known as the “marijuana capital of the world.”



GPS - Fleet Liability Protection

Mission Linen’s Eureka, CA, facility has installed global positioning units in delivery trucks for its 14 routes. The

equipment helps the company track driver performance, and enables managers at the plant to get a live view of where the driver is at any given time. This helps if customers call about the status of deliveries, but recently this technology provided an added benefit when a lawyer threatened to sue the company over one of its drivers.

“There was a suit that was being filed by a lawyer, that our truck was involved in a minor accident,” says Dennis Pieper, general manager for the Eureka plant. He added that the attorney was filing a lawsuit claiming that Mission’s driver was operating erratically and driving at a high rate of speed.

“We said, ‘Really?’ They filed a lawsuit,” Pieper added. “We used the GPS. Our truck was going less than five miles an hour and was not driving erratically. We brought up the GPS report to them. They said, ‘We don’t have anything else to talk about. Good-bye.’ Lawsuit canceled. Done and gone. It’s protection for ourselves and safety for ourselves.”

Mission Eureka has a diversified product mix to meet the demands of today’s market. Roughly 12%–14% of the plant’s throughput is healthcare flatwork. Standing near the loading dock we saw lines of yellow slings designated for healthcare. The plant processes rental textiles for three area hospitals, Pieper says. The remaining 86% of the plant’s throughput is industrial uniform goods, including 20,000 shop towels a week; food and beverage (F&B) and hospitality items. In the peak summer season, the plant processes up to 125,000 lbs. per week through this plant that has 8,000 square feet downstairs and another 15,500 square feet on an upper level.

In the soil-sort area, employees separated food and beverage goods into 220–270 lb. slings that were then put on a hoist and raised to an overhead rail system near the ceiling to await processing in one of several washer/extractors. Empty carts that arrived with soiled goods are cleaned in a Leonard Automatics cart washer.

The plant’s wash aisle includes two 675 lb. split-pocket washer/extractors from Ellis Corp. The plant also has two 450 lb. Ellis split-pocket washer/extractors. Laundry chemistry, including peracetic acid instead of bleach, is supplied through an Ultrax chemical-injection system from Ecolab Inc. Smaller loads, stain rewash and specialty items are processed in two Unimac 125 lb. front-loading washer/extractors. After washing, the goods move by cart and conveyor to the finishing area. The plant has two 400 lb. dyers from Consolidated Laundry Machinery (CLM) and one 220 lb. G. A. Braun Inc. dryer. There also are two smaller dryers from Unimac.

The finishing area includes two ironer lines featuring rebuilt Super Sylons from American Laundry Machinery. One eight-roll ironer is equipped with a Sager Spreader on the front end and a Chicago Skyline folder on the back end. While the Sager equipment is an older style of machinery, they’re a common sight in flatwork plants. Pieper cited the Sager Spreader’s versatility in processing

a variety of products, including fitted sheets. The other ironer, a six-roll machine, is followed by a Lavatec 2 in 1 folder. Garments are pressed in two Colmac triple buck shirt presses. The plant has a Sharp bagging system that has automated the packaging of many of the shop towels and bar mops.

The plant runs 14 routes, including two healthcare, seven linen and five industrial routes.

A Eureka native, Pieper's father worked in the plant at 1401 Summer St. in the '50s and '60s. Pieper also worked in the plant as a teenager before taking others jobs in the course of a 40-plus year career in textile services, prior to his returning to Mission Eureka in 2009. Pieper recalled arriving early in the morning to start the boiler. That's one reason why he likes to show off the plant's 1993 Lattner boiler and a 1958 Dixon 220 HP boiler. Since his return to the plant, Pieper led a two-year refurbishing effort in the boiler room. It was the cleanest and most esthetically pleasing boiler room this correspondent's seen in 15 years of touring and writing about laundries. "This is the heartbeat of the place," Pieper says of the two boilers, which operate on a rotating basis. "This was the original boiler when I was a kid," he adds pointing to the older machine. "I used to come in at 4 o'clock in the morning to start it." Both boilers comply with California's limits on nitrogen oxide emissions (NOx). "This is my pride and joy here," Pieper says.

CONTINUOUS-IMPROVEMENT ETHIC

Pieper's makeover of the plant's boiler room says something about his management style and outlook on equipment, real estate and most importantly: staff.

Pieper understands that to get staff buy-in on his approach to safety awareness, he must involve them directly in the process. It's natural for employees to question the need for safety training. Many assume nothing's going to happen to them. Pieper's approach is not only to tell

Recruiting Tip—'Always Have a Plan in Play'

When Dennis Pieper took on general manager duties at Mission Linen, Eureka, he brought a staff-recruiting philosophy to the facility that calls for continuous interviewing of candidates—even when no jobs are open. He likens it to baseball pitchers warming up in the bullpen.

Early on at Mission Eureka, Pieper says he encouraged his team to alter their approach to interviewing candidates. "'Your best interview is, do you realize when it is folks?' They go, 'No.' I go, 'When you don't need anybody. That is your best time to interview. Because it's called building a bullpen.'"

Pieper says he wouldn't necessarily approach a production manager about a candidate, "But if people came, and they put an application in. I looked at it, 'I want to talk to this person. Call them up.' They were working, but they wanted to improve. They were only working part-time, they want to go to full-time."

He'll tell candidates to stay in touch. "I earmarked it. If somebody was going to be leaving, I didn't have to wait for an application process, I had a bullpen. I tried to do that at a route-sales level as well. Always have a plan in play the best you can."

them that he's trying to keep them from getting hurt, he *shows* them that both he and the company care about their safety. Pieper involves hourly and management staff in committees and subcommittees that discuss an array of safety issues. He leads celebrations of safety and keeps these programs fresh by soliciting staff for ideas.

Pieper says that keeping the facilities up to par, particularly in an older building, is critical to maintaining employee morale and gaining their trust. That, in turn, reinforces incident-prevention efforts. "It's more buy-in," he says. "Of all the things that we do, if I can make that bathroom safer than it is, then so be it. I just think pride...attitude...feel-good, all has a bearing."

Stepping into Pieper's narrow-gauge office after the tour, we're flanked by walls jammed with safety awards and plaques from TRSA, Mission and other organizations. These types of recognition help Mission Eureka make the case that it cares for its people, Pieper says. "When I ask for them to be as safe as possible, I'm trying to do the right thing for them in many ways. Send you home safe. Give

you a good environment to come to. Give you a clean lunchroom to come in to. I'm giving, and I'm asking at the same time. I'm not just asking without giving."

In addition to fewer accidents, a strong overall staff performance is another payback for Pieper's commitment to excellence in safety and working conditions. We've noted the plant's double-digit revenue increase since 2009. Mission Eureka also has a near 96% customer retention rate and many longtime staff members who've embraced Pieper's vision of a safe, efficient, well-equipped plant that's achieving brisk growth in Northern California. **TS**

Editor's Note: Mission Eureka completed 2016 without a single lost-time accident and recently was honored with the company's Safety Plant of the Year Award. "My team continues to raise the bar and currently we are at 1,457 consecutive days of no lost-time incidents," Pieper says.

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