

**We invite readers** to offer ideas for this regular column, designed to help municipal and utility managers deal with day-to-day people issues like motivation, team building, recognition and interpersonal relationships. Feel free to share your secrets for building and maintaining a cohesive, productive team. Or ask a question about a specific issue on which you would like advice. Call editor Luke Laggis at 800-257-7222, or email [editor@mswmag.com](mailto:editor@mswmag.com).

# SAFETY IS NO ACCIDENT

Engaged employees help utility go years without a lost-time injury

By Ken Wysochy

If the Beaufort-Jasper Water & Sewer Authority had in-house medical personnel, they'd be pretty bored. After all, the utility — based in Okatie, near Beaufort on South Carolina's coastline — went nearly two million work hours without a lost-time injury, from March 2015 to March 2021.

The secret sauce for the remarkable 6-year-long, 1.95-million-hour injury-free streak? A safety program that involves a broad base of employees and receives strong support from senior management, both of which have helped to firmly establish a safety-first culture that permeates every corner of the organization, says Steve Lee, safety specialist.

National organizations have taken notice of the authority's safety success. The utility has earned nearly two dozen national, state and local awards, including recognition from the National Safety Council, the American Water Works Association and the Water Environment Federation.

It's not as if the utility had a bad safety record before Lee was promoted to manage the safety program in 2013. But Lee, a former electrician at the utility and a self-admitted safety enthusiast, turned things up a notch.

Lee strengthened a safety team that comprises 10 employees from all sections of the utility. They serve two-year terms (they can serve a third year, if they want), then get rotated out to let more employees get involved.

Furthermore, Lee sets annual goals for team members, noting that setting expectations is important to a successful program. Employees must sign the goals statement, which reinforces its importance.

The team meets once a month and convenes each time at a different utility facility. After discussing any safety concerns, the group performs a safety inspection of the facility, compiles a report that highlights actionable items and gives it to the facility leaders.

"They know there's 10 sets of eyes on them all year," he says. "Things are unintentionally neglected at times, which creates safety hazards. So these inspections serve as a reminder."

## Analyzing mistakes

In addition, Lee — who's so passionate about safety he went back to college in 2015 to earn a degree in occupational safety — created an eight-member incident-analysis team. It's composed of higher-level employees such as managers and supervisors who have the authority to make changes in policies and procedures, as well as purchases of safety gear when needed.

The team members take an accident-investigation class at the Georgia Institute of Technology (Georgia Tech).

"That helps them know what kind of questions to ask during our meetings," Lee says. "If we have, say, an incident or perhaps property damage, we discuss it and figure out what kind of corrective action should be taken to prevent it from happening again."

The deep employee involvement also extends to safety training. About 10 employees are certified trainers in a variety of areas, including defensive driving, CPR, confined-space work, respiratory protection, fall protection and personal protection equipment. In fact, about 140 people out of approximately 180 employees are certified in CPR.

"You name it, we're teaching classes about it," Lee says.

Those certified trainers then perform in-house employee training. When combined with the safety and incident analysis teams, Lee says he has nearly three dozen people who serve as what he calls "safety disciples." Plus there are past members of teams and trainers who also enforce the safety mindset.

"I may be the safety guy, but they're all branches of my tree," he notes.

## Plan and protect

Lee also strengthened a Take Two program that requires employees to take two minutes before they start to work and do a quick job-safety analysis.



**"You name it, we're teaching classes about it."**

Steve Lee



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**“We had to reinforce that if something happened, it was OK to report it, even if it stopped the streak.”**

Steve Lee

“It’s basically a checklist of things to think about before they start a job,” he explains. “Are you using the right tools, equipment, PPE and so forth. It’s just to make sure they set themselves up for safety success.”

In the past, some employees would shirk safety measures when setting up for work, figuring if a job wouldn’t take long, it was a waste of time to prep the work zone.

“But I tell them it only takes a second to get hurt,” Lee says. “So we shifted from a hurry-up-and-get-the-job-done mentality to setting up jobs for safety, no matter how long it takes.”

Aside from the long stretch without any lost-time injuries, Lee says other metrics indicate the strides the utility has made in safety. For example, just before he got involved in the safety program, a survey showed the utility stood in the 68th percentile among 600 companies and organizations that belong to the NSC.

In 2015, the utility rose to the 84th percentile. In 2017, it hit the 93rd percentile. And in 2019, it reached the 95th percentile. Lee says much of that improvement stems from deep employee involvement and strong management support.

“From a cultural standpoint, we’re very safety oriented,” he says.

The emphasis on safety also has reduced the utility’s worker-compensation insurance premiums.

### Success begets success

Why did Lee restructure the utility’s safety initiatives? “If I’m going to manage a program, I want it to make a difference,” he says. “I’m very passionate about safety. And because we have such strong management support, employees aren’t afraid to come forward with safety concerns.”

Employee consciousness about and support for safety also grew stronger as the streak of injury-free days got longer and longer. As the old saying goes, nothing succeeds like success.

“If anything, it became somewhat of a challenge because we didn’t want employees to hide injuries just to keep the streak alive,” Lee points out. “We had to reinforce that if something happened, it was OK to report it, even if it stopped the streak.”

To further reinforce the importance of a safety culture, the utility celebrated every 250,000-hour increment of injury-free hours and gave employees small prizes. At the one-million-hour mark, for example, they all received a Bose Bluetooth speaker. And even though the utility fell short of the two-million-hour mark, all employees still received cash bonuses, ranging from \$500 to \$1,000 for those with “safety-sensitive” jobs, Lee says.

As for starting another streak, the utility is up to 124,000 hours without a lost-time injury, as of mid-August.

“We’re gunning for one million hours,” Lee says. “Then we’ll shoot for two million hours. And I think we’re going to get there. We constantly put safety before everything we do.” ♦

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