

The joint occupational health and safety committee at Pacific Bolt gathers for a meeting.

Getting to the nuts and bolts of a healthy, happy workplace

By Sarah Ripplinger

Outdated equipment. Injuries on the rise. Instead of making bolts, staff were bolting. Thankfully, this is now in the past for Pacific Bolt, a Langley-based manufacturer and distributor of nuts and bolts, fasteners, and more. A company-wide culture change brought with it increased business, fewer injuries, and a dedicated workforce committed to health and safety.

Pacific Bolt Manufacturing was a stereotypically old-school space. Minor injuries were par for the course, a messy workplace the norm. A few years ago, a worker's finger was crushed in a machine. Stepping away from the status quo was needed to retain employees and put the company back on the upswing.

"We needed to change our mentality," admits Trevor Borland, who initiated health and safety improvements around the time he became Pacific Bolt's president in 2014. "It was about challenging the norm in the industry and at Pacific Bolt."

Borland grew up watching the inner workings of bolt making at the family-owned and operated company his dad started in 1988, and began working full-time at their New Westminster location in about 2005.

Back then, he says, "the mentality used to be that because that's how we've always done it, that's how we'll always do it."

Burning out

In 2014, Pacific Bolt's insurance premiums were high and worker retention abysmal; the company of around 40 workers had completed records of employment for 100 people. "I couldn't believe it," says Borland. "Our retention was bad because no one wanted to work here."

Borland knew that, to steer Pacific Bolt in a new direction, the company needed buy-in from management and staff, and that started with creating a workplace that was safe, clean, free of bullies, and an enjoyable and fun place to be.

"We started to make improvements like repainting machines, cleaning the floors, organizing, tidying, and

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—Trevor Borland, President, Pacific Bolt

getting better tools,” says Borland. Even small improvements to work areas, such as fixing someone’s desk, increased buy-in from workers — who started to request more small fixes and take the initiative to fix things themselves.

Shifting a mentality

Today, Pacific Bolt puts a lot of stock in its occupational health and safety committee. The committee’s strong contingent of members, including Borland, is passionate about safety and wants to improve the company’s track record.

“We have a team of five, and I would definitely call it a team,” says Borland. “We value everyone’s opinion and everyone is an equal.”

Dylan Thompson, who is the head of safety at Pacific Bolt, completes workplace safety inspections with other committee members once per month.

“We use these inspections to speak with employees and identify possible workplace safety issues,” he says. “Our weekly Monday morning shop talks have helped to communicate issues to the workforce, as well as get feedback immediately from employees. There is no set time length for the meeting, and people are encouraged to take as long as they need so that all issues are addressed.”

Borland supports safety by empowering his team to make his company better. “If someone on the floor or in the office has an idea that they think can make the company safer or better, we’ll try it.”

From rags to riches

Since moving to their new Langley location in June 2018, Pacific Bolt has only had one workplace incident that resulted in lost time at work. Compared to beforehand, when they saw an average of one

time-loss incident every two to three months, the improvement is what Borland calls “a huge game changer.”

“We’re hoping that if we keep doing what we’re doing now, in another couple years, our premiums will go way down.”

Having a good track record on health and safety has also brought in larger contracts with companies for which protecting worker safety is required to win a bid.

“Today we’re known for being reliable and dependable,” says Borland. This reputation is helping them increase the number and quality of the contracts they get. The company has been able to provide bolts for high-profile infrastructures, such as the Granville and Golden Ears bridges, SkyTrain lines, Vancouver streetlights, and connectors for highway barriers.

Anticipating the unexpected

Borland owes some of the company’s success to keeping an open mind and being proactive instead of reactive. “We’re at a point now where we’re looking for near misses before they become incidents, and potential workplace dangers.”

For example, in October 2018, an ammonia leak at a nearby business led to an evacuation order at Pacific Bolt, forcing the company to shut its doors for two days. After the incident, Pacific Bolt’s health and safety committee got in touch with WorkSafeBC occupational safety officer, Gerhard Renzmann, to find out what they could do better next time to address hazards outside of their facility.

“Trevor was very concerned, and so was I,” recalls Renzmann. “We talked about having an evacuation plan and what to do to prepare for another potential ammonia leak in the future.”

A new lease on productivity

The new workplace mentality Borland initiated has boosted staff morale and enjoyment, along with Pacific Bolt's profit margins.

"The combination of a clean and efficient workplace; increased investment in staff training and culture; and, a proactive safety committee has increased our productivity by about 15 to 20 percent using the same equipment as we had at the old shop," says Borland.

"By increasing staff retention, we have the added advantage of not having to replace as many staff, which also greatly reduces the time and energy spent on hiring and training new staff."

Now, instead of losing money on worker injuries and staff churn, Pacific Bolt will put \$500-1,000 a month towards team-building activities — like a Maui-style ribs barbecue — to keep the positive momentum rolling. The gains in workplace productivity and worker health and safety, Borland says, "are way more valuable than the cost of a lunch." ☺



WorkSafeBC occupational safety officer Gerhard Renzmann meets with Pacific Bolt's general manager Carey Stankov and president Trevor Borland.

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