



This machine takes care of some of the heavy lifting at Red Truck Beer Company.

Young workers have a voice at Vancouver brewing company

By Jesse Marchand

Cultivating a culture of communication is core to the business of making beer for Red Truck Beer Company.

Part science. Part art. Part craft. That's how Justin Vickaryous, director of brewery operations at Red Truck Beer Company describes craft brewing. That three-part recipe relates not just to their beers, but to how they craft a culture of communication about the beer they produce, the health and safety processes they have, and everything in between.

The award-winning beer company relies on its passionate and dedicated staff both in the lab and in the warehouse — places where training and safe procedures can mean the difference between brewing a good beer and brewing the potential for an injury.

"When you take a look around at the people who work here, they genuinely want to be here. They are a very engaged workforce, but there's also a sense of creative licence," says Vickaryous. "We can't make the product without the people."

Where there's a will, there's a way

Craft brewers tend to be in their mid-30s, are post-secondary educated, and tech savvy, says Prescillia

(Percy) Chua, a senior policy advisor at WorkSafeBC. Chua, a former occupational hygiene officer, helped form a craft-brewing strategy with WorkSafeBC's Risk Analysis Unit in 2015, when the industry was categorized as an emerging risk. In visiting several breweries across B.C., Chua found that most brewers come to the craft from a love of brewing, which may not extend to a deep knowledge of health and safety.

"They network with other brewers and share information in person and online. Brewers are very innovative and resourceful when finding health and safety solutions," she says. This drive for innovation also means they tend to hire younger staff, many from the under-25 demographic, which includes people who are getting jobs for the first time.

These young workers can be at risk if they aren't properly trained and supervised. On average, 18 young workers are injured daily in B.C. Meanwhile, the craft-brewing industry has significant risks.

"I've been in the industry a long time and there are a lot of hazards that are associated with the production of craft beer: confined space, ergonomics, CO₂ [carbon dioxide] awareness. There's a myriad of hazards out there and it's all about preventing and mitigating those hazards," says Vickaryous.

“Young workers have the right to speak up about health and safety without fear of repercussion.”

—Justin Vickaryous, director of brewery operations at Red Truck Beer Company

One of the common dangers is carbon dioxide. At most breweries, CO₂ is used or produced in many of the processes. For example, it's used to keep oxygen out of the beer and carbonate it. However, “carbon dioxide is a major issue because it's inconspicuous, and exposure to high levels can cause serious adverse health effects,” notes Chua.

To mitigate the risk, Red Truck has carbon-dioxide monitors on site to alert if there are any issues. The company also has signs on all tanks that point to confined spaces — these are places where a person could enter, even partially, to perform work, but have limited or restricted means of exit.

“There are so many pieces that you have to have in place to make your brewery operate,” says Vickaryous. “One of those major components is a really good safety plan.”

Learning from the past

Creating a plan at Red Truck came in part from Vickaryous's experiences as a young worker. His first job was in retail at 16. “I remember that it was basically: ‘Here's your badge. You need to do this.’ There was no real talk of safety at that time.”

When he first started in beer production in 1997, the safety picture was a lot clearer.

“I worked in a quality-control lab for malt, which is a major component of beer. That was a very different experience than my first job,” says Vickaryous. “There was a lot of emphasis put on safety.” With exposure to heavy equipment and a lab, Vickaryous says the safety training was welcome and gave him valuable experience in a large facility where procedures were necessary to produce large volumes of beer. He now applies that experience from a large employer to his craft-brewing business — implementing health and safety plans that are normally in place in much larger companies.

Open lines of communication

Today, Vickaryous makes sure that all of his staff, from delivery drivers to the packaging line, are trained

in healthy and safe work procedures. One of the ways he does this is by looking into incidents that happen on the floor, no matter how small.

“Let's say somebody walking through the warehouse has a close call with a forklift driving too fast. We will sit down and discuss that incident with everybody to make sure that does not happen again,” says Vickaryous.

Investigating near misses like these, is part of Red Truck's communication policy. “Young workers have the right to speak up about safety without fear of repercussion,” notes Vickaryous. “We have a culture here where it's perfectly acceptable for a young worker to question whether something is safe. And the more that we can engage with those people, the more productive we're going to be, and the more people are going to want to come to work.”

Policies that enable open communication allow young workers to actively participate in health and safety. This in turn can lead to improved safe work procedures and a better trained and informed workforce. It also leads well into training, as workers can ask questions at any time. Red Truck makes sure that new workers are trained not just in the equipment that they use, but in the bigger picture for how that machinery functions on the line and what could go wrong if procedures aren't followed. Even after training, new workers aren't just put on a piece of equipment right away.

“We will have somebody shadow all those positions until they've been fully trained and then they're signed off and ready to go,” says Vickaryous.

At the end of the day

Overall, their safety program hinges on clear communication. “Our approach here is that essentially everybody has a voice,” adds Vickaryous.

“At the end of the day, when you're sitting down to have a beer after work, it's very hard to enjoy that beer if somebody has been hurt along the way.” ☺