



# Teamwork

## MAKES THE PRECAST DREAM WORK

Photo courtesy Lindsay Precast

By using **team-building strategies** and helping employees understand their efforts and opinions matter, precasters **cultivate strong workforces**, improve productivity and run safer plants.

By Bridget McCrea

**T**eamwork and camaraderie are not innate aspects of a workforce and cannot be established quickly or easily. They take time, effort and investment to build and must be continually fostered as personnel and the outside environment change. However, for business owners and managers who succeed in creating them, the rewards are many.

For Megan Kitchner, building them on the precast plant floor requires a two-pronged approach that incorporates both emotional and physical elements. For example, using positive reinforcement instead of negative reinforcement helps her create an enjoyable and productive work atmosphere in her role as general manager at Sarasota, Fla.-based Atlantic TNG.

“I always ask my employees for help, and I always say ‘please’ and ‘thank you,’” she said, noting that simple gestures go a long way in making employees feel valued.

Recently, Atlantic TNG began handing out “I Love My Job” T-shirts to employees in an effort to stoke conversations about what people like about their jobs.

“This was mostly for the employees’ benefit, to get them thinking about it and actually saying it out loud,” Kitchner said.

The exercise generated some heartfelt responses from employees, such as providing food for their families, a reason for getting up each morning, and working with their individual teams and not letting them down because “this is like a second family.”

A patch-off at Lindsay Precast in Canal Fulton, Ohio, is used as a teaching opportunity and provides employees a chance to show their knowledge and skills.

The physical elements of teamwork are equally as important, according to Kitchner, who said company employees work together to donate time and resources to charities and organizations through fundraising events.

“We celebrate holidays and have general meetings with food and an open forum so everyone feels like a part of the company,” Kitchner added. “We also give out ‘I Love Precast’ shirts to individuals who come up with a suggestion to help productivity, make a process better or easier, or improve morale.”

Recently, for example, one Atlantic TNG employee suggested a company outing where team members could picnic, socialize and play football. Another mentioned his love of a past event, where a truck came on-site and handed out ice cream to employees. Kitchner said the company is now working to put the events together in the near future.

“We’re going to have that ice cream truck come back next week,” said Kitchner, who covers the cost of the ice cream. “It’s so hot – everyone just loves it.”

Kitchner also set up a Wellness Committee that focuses on initiatives like “wake up and warm up” stretches that build teamwork while also teaching some good life skills to prevent injuries.

“The employees would laugh, show off, and just in general enjoy the time together and take part in the financial coaching, nutrition workshops and positivity workshops,” she said.

In return for its team-building efforts, Atlantic TNG has cultivated an employee base that wants to help, is proud of its work and sees itself as a valued part of the company’s overall success.

“As precasters, we work too hard to not at least get the satisfaction of being surrounded by good people having a common goal and getting along with one another,” Kitchner said. “Employees want to be part of something that they’re proud of. They want to be proud of where they work, and they want to be happy with their jobs.

“And when we have happier employees, those individuals are healthier and more productive. It’s a pretty simple equation.”

## PROMOTING PRODUCTIVITY, IMPROVING MORALE

There is a lot written about the power of collaboration and community in the workforce, but not all of that thinking makes its way to the plant floor.

“Ideal teamwork doesn’t come immediately but with a few wise techniques, you can stir its growth in your team,” writes Dixie Somers in *The Power of Teamwork in Factory Management*.

Such efforts help encourage cooperation and new levels of trust, she adds, while also allowing the company to meet its goals and improve overall productivity levels.

“Sports teams encourage participation of each player towards

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– Megan Kitchner, *Atlantic TNG*



achieving an ultimate goal,” Somers writes. “Similarly, good teamwork within a factory setting can promote productivity, morale and a satisfied, loyal workforce.”

As a program manager at the Michigan Manufacturing Technology Center, Charlie Westra conducts workshops and training sessions focused on team-building, supervisory skills and leadership.

He plainly states that, “If you’re not interested in building your teams, then you’re probably not interested in building your business.”

That’s because leaders and teams make or break businesses – a fact that can be tracked from management to the sales team to the plant floor.

For precasters, the need for good team-building in production isn’t always obvious, said Westra, nor is it easy to orchestrate. That’s because most manufacturers promote employees based on individual motivation levels.

“In many cases, it’s the top performers who get promoted, yet they don’t always have the skills to help others with their own motivation,” Westra said. “The notion is that the new manager’s or leader’s work ethic will simply rub off on the team. But that rarely ever happens.”

To avoid this problem, Westra said precasters should focus on

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Team-building activities help employees improve their communication, motivation and understanding of one’s strengths and weaknesses.



training, particularly when it comes to leadership and management skills. At a very basic level, he said initiating programs that reward workers for a job well done is a good starting point. A plant that meets its safety goals for the quarter, for instance, could be treated to a Friday afternoon barbecue in the parking lot. Or, a specific team that exceeded its productivity goals for the week could receive cash or individual restaurant gift cards.

“When it comes to showing appreciation, the gestures don’t have to be huge,” Westra said. “In many cases, simply connecting with workers on an individual level and regularly communicating appreciation are enough to help stoke teamwork, loyalty and collaboration on the plant floor.”

## COMPETITIVE TEAM BUILDING

Knowing that many of its plant employees thrive on friendly competition, Lindsay Precast’s Canal Fulton, Ohio, plant holds patching competitions that not only pit workers against one another, but that also help the company achieve its training goals. The premise is simple: provide two similar structures that have suffered the same damage and the raw materials necessary to do the patch, and have two employees go head-to-head to solve the problem.

“A newer employee can challenge anyone – even a manager or a tenured employee – to a patch-off,” said Dean Wolosiansky, general manager. “After our morning meeting and safety talk, everyone gathers around to either watch or participate in the event.”

Even before the patch-off takes place, employees rally around one another and rile each other up.

“It really brings everyone together kind of like a sporting event,” Wolosiansky said.

Judged not only on speed and time, but also on quality of

workmanship, the competitors work quickly to get their patches completed first. Observing the competition serves as a learning tool for newer employees.

“They can see firsthand what we’re looking for in terms of work quality and in terms of the tolerances and aesthetics for any type of patch work,” Wolosiansky said.

With a plethora of team-building resources right at their fingertips, precasters that aren’t already fostering effective collaboration can start by using these strategies that Bryan Mattimore, co-founder of Norwalk, Conn.-based Growth Engine Innovation Agency uses with his company’s manufacturing clients:

**1. BRAINSTORMING STATIONS.** In a technique called triggered brainwalking, two-person teams go to their brainstorming station set up around a room and write down ideas. Then teams rotate to their neighbors’ stations and build on or add new ideas to the ones already written down.

“It’s a great way to generate dozens and dozens of more ideas than in a traditional brainstorming session,” Mattimore said. “Most importantly, everyone at every level gets a chance to contribute.”

**2. PUBLIC WHITEBOARDS.** Precasters can post whiteboards in public spaces, rooms or hallways and post a creative challenge on the whiteboard. Next, invite employees to contribute by writing down ideas, usually over a seven-to-10-day period.

“It’s a great way to get ideas from everyone in the plant and without having to hold a formal meeting/brainstorm session,” Mattimore said.

**3. THINK MODULAR.** Mattimore encourages precasters to get rid of conference tables in their meeting rooms and replace them with “modularizable” tables.

“It’s much easier to be creative, productive and collaborative when teams are at islands of tables versus one big conference table,” Mattimore said.

Whether they’re using whiteboards or advanced software, T-shirts or hands-on competitions, today’s manufacturers continue to find innovative ways to keep collaboration, camaraderie and team-building a focal point on their plant floors. According to Kitchner, such initiatives should always start with a simple goal in mind: to get everyone positive, upbeat, on the same page and ready to work. The good news is that in many cases, all it takes is a leader’s or manager’s attentive ear to help make that dream work.

“People want to know that their voices are being heard and that what they’re doing really matters,” Kitchner said. **PI**

*Bridget McCrea is a freelance writer who covers manufacturing, industry and technology. She is a winner of the Florida Magazine Association’s Gold Award for best trade-technical feature statewide.*



Photo courtesy Atlantic TNG