

Guardian Industries: Building Success Through Employee Involvement

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Guardian Industries is not the place any of us should want to build a career if we're interested in waiting for someone to tell us what to do.

If, on the other hand, having diverse responsibilities AND the authority to meet those responsibilities is attractive, this diversified manufacturer of glass and glass products, building products, and other products might be an "employer of choice."

Headquartered in Auburn Hills, Michigan, Guardian Industries was founded in 1932 as a small fabricator of glass products. The company continued until 1957 when it encountered financial difficulties. That's the point where William Davidson took the reins of the organization and began applying his personal business philosophies to the company. The results speak for themselves.

Guardian now has over 19,000 employees in 21 countries on five continents and annual sales in the multi-BILLION dollar range. The organization is privately held and still headed by Davidson, who also owns the NBA Detroit Pistons, the NHL Tampa Bay Lightning, and the WNBA Detroit Shock.

What are some of the factors that have contributed to the significant growth and continued success of this organization?

"Mr. Davidson has long been a believer in a flat, lean organization," offered Doug

Petersma, Human Resources Manager for Guardian's De Witt, Iowa, operations. "Part of Guardian's operating philosophy is a hatred of bureaucracy with the focus on adding value and eliminating waste."

Guardian, with its multiple locations, encourages healthy internal competition. People at Guardian like to win and when they win they like to celebrate their successes.

When asked how this flat, entrepreneurial business model differentiated it in its efforts to attract and retain the right employees, Petersma stated that their intent is to give people at all levels of the organization the authority and responsibility to make decisions. "For example, in most plants we only have one job classification for all hourly employees. Employees are expected to make decisions about how their area will run, they're NOT expected to wait for a supervisor or manager to make decisions for them. Our employees are expected to think for themselves and we know that, given the right information about our business and our costs, they can and WILL help us be successful. Anyone who comes here expecting to be an individual contributor or single-focused in what they do won't be as successful as they could be."

Guardian Industries believes that while traditional training serves a purpose, much of what their employees need to know is learned by actual experience.

"We try to give our employees clear expectations," Petersma said. "We know occasionally they will make mistakes but the important thing is that we have supervisors and managers who will help them learn from those mistakes. Those aren't the kind of experiences that can be offered in a classroom."

Current trends in training and development are concentrated on taking lean manufacturing concepts to the shop floor as well as continuing to drive responsibility, authority, and decision-making into the organization.

"Last year, when it came to setting goals for our plant operations, our plant manager selected a team of employees including managers, supervisors, support staff and production employees to set the goals for the plant," Petersma explained. The Plant Manager made sure the team had access to all the data and information they could possibly need and told them that THEY had to tell HIM what the goals for the next year should look like. "He wasn't even on the team. It helped us create a plan that had better employee 'buy-in' than we've ever had before and we've done the same thing again for this year."

When asked how Guardian assesses the results of its training and development activities, Petersma commented that several means of evaluation were used.

"We'd be the last people to say we have all the answers to that question," he offered. "It's something we

wrestle with constantly. Seeing people use what you've taught them is certainly one good indication that training has worked, and we look at results as well."

Guardian Industries makes every possible effort to tie as much of each employee's compensation to plant and departmental performance. They believe that offering each employee incentives to maximize results creates a "win-win" situation for employees at all levels, customers, the communities in which they live and work, and the owners of the organization.

"We have to link clear expectations, training, results, AND compensation," Petersma stated.

And while Guardian Industries sees itself as a flat organization, they don't just pay lip service to it. When asked how many "layers" of leadership he'd have to go through, following the organizational chart, in order to speak directly with William Davidson, the owner, Petersma paused and said, "My third call would be to Mr. Davidson."

Now THAT is flat!