

The IBEW SPARQ

A quarterly newsletter highlighting IBEW values

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Building a Culture of Safety on the Job

Good wages, benefits and working conditions are hallmarks of the IBEW's strong contracts. But there's one condition more fundamental than anything else: ensuring that members return home healthy and unharmed every day.

as our industry has changed so dramatically," said Kim Greene, president and CEO of Atlanta-based Southern Company Gas. "Maintaining our safe operations is absolutely paramount. Having trained, skilled, confident workers is the key to that."

finally asked workers for their opinions, responses poured in.

"People care about safety. They had something to say, and boy did they say it," Greene said. "They let us know that we were paying way too much attention to the small stuff and were being distracted from the big stuff...that we were operating in many ways by being lucky, not necessarily by being smart."

Management realized that "we'd created a culture where people weren't reporting, a culture of being hard on people who tripped and fell, being hard on people who smashed their finger, being hard on people who got an insect bite and might have blown a period of time of no injuries for a work group," she said.

Partnering with the IBEW and safety experts, Southern Company Gas began concentrating on critical risks, the tasks most likely to cause serious injuries or fatalities. The result, along with the company's response, might surprise you.

"This year, the recordable incident rate is as high as it's been in 10 years," Greene said. "But I feel like our company is safer than ever. I don't think we're having more injuries, I think that people are telling us about it now."

Working with the IBEW, she said, "We're creating a learning environment where it is clear that we really care about keeping people safe."



Beyond the bargaining table, the IBEW is partnering with employers to build a true culture of safety.

"Our members do an excellent job looking out for each other and minimizing risks. But that's not enough," International President Lonnie R. Stephenson said. "Employers have to be every bit as committed to job safety as we are."

With the IBEW's input and encouragement, they increasingly are.

"We've had the privilege to work side by side with our IBEW partners

Greene told the audience at the IBEW Membership Development Conference in Chicago in August how her company changed its approach to safety after consulting with workers.

For years, management focused on an OSHA metric known as the "recordable incident rate" that measures work-related deaths, injuries and illnesses. Deciding the rate was too high, they cracked down on employees, demanding they "work smarter." The rate dropped, but something wasn't right. When the company



What does SPARQ mean to you? Have an idea for the newsletter? Email theSPARQ@ibew.org



Opening the Door to a Safer Workplace

Workers at La Plata Electric Association in southwestern Colorado have had lots of ideas over the years to improve job safety and training. But little changed until recently.

Now “management is committed 100 percent,” said Derek Burns, assistant business manager at Denver Local 111, which represents the 90-member unit.

Under new CEO Jessica Matlock’s leadership, workers, managers and union leaders are crafting a Code of Excellence agreement, a process that is fostering cooperation and respect. Safety is paramount, but many other workplace issues are being discussed.

“There’s accountability, honesty and integrity for our membership and the company,” Business Manager Rich Meisinger said. “There’s no lip service from either side.”

Meisinger and Burns drove six hours from Denver to meet Matlock on her first day. They’d heard good things from IBEW leaders in Washington state, where she was a top manager at a large public utility district.

After years of frustrations and high turnover among workers at La Plata, the Local 111 leaders were hopeful. And they weren’t disappointed.

“She told us her biggest issue was safety—making sure that her people are safe and that they have the tools, equipment and training they need,” Burns said.

With that door open, he and Meisinger brought up the Code of Excellence. Matlock embraced it.

Beyond the COE meetings, she’s been talking one on one with every employee. “They’re not holding back,” Burns said. “We’ve told them, ‘If you have a beef with the company, this is the time to bring it up.’”

The open lines of communication are reinforcing shared goals, from keeping each other safe to providing the best possible customer service.

“Even managers who weren’t completely on board have come around and gotten inspired,” Burns said. “And my group is really inspired.”



SPARQ GOES LOCAL



IBEW 2019 RENEW/NextGen Conference

More than 500 young leaders attended last year’s IBEW RENEW/NextGen Conference and learned about the difference they can make every day in their workplaces and in their union when they commit to the IBEW Code of Excellence. RENEW and NextGen members are serious about their roles in building a strong IBEW—and demonstrating the core values of SPARQ is part of making that future a reality.

