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A key part of any good safety program is good communication. But when your workers speak multiple languages, how do you get the message across?

Pratt & Larson Tile in Portland tackles this challenge every day. With more than 130 employees, many of whom are immigrants or refugees from other countries, the company has as many as a dozen different languages spoken among its workforce.

"Our key strategy is to always make sure there's someone to translate and answer questions for those who don't speak English," says Vance Perry, vice president of operations at Pratt & Larson. "Our managers are very proactive in getting information out to the employees - always with an interpreter when necessary."



Pratt & Larson specializes in high-end and custom ceramic tiles for residential and commercial installations. It manufactures more than 1,500 shapes and sizes of tiles that are sold all over the U.S. and Canada. Last year, the company turned more than 1.3 million pounds of clay into tiles and other ceramic products. Its kilns fire around the clock, seven days a week, producing 1,700 square feet of tile each day.

### Diversity and community

With this kind of output and creative production, it's important to keep employees happy and motivated to work. The company has more than 30 native Tibetans working among its ranks, and at least 20 others from Vietnam, Latin America, Romania, and elsewhere who do not speak English fluently. Perry says the large number of foreign-born workers wasn't planned, just the result of several good referrals and a little luck.



"We had an excellent employee--a Tibetan--referred to us several years ago by another company that was closing its doors," says Perry. "We became as delighted to have her on board as they had been. Eventually, her husband came to work for us as well. Over time, many of the people in their community heard that this is a good place to work, and they applied through referrals."



The positive attitude held by many of these foreign-born employees, as well as certain individuals' abilities to translate English into multiple foreign languages, helped create efficient routes of communication and community within the workforce at Pratt & Larson. For many of the employees, working alongside family and friends also fostered a vibrant workplace that has become like a family, where co-workers look out for each other's safety and welfare.

### Accountability and rewards

At the end of every step of the process, the employee who handles a batch of tilework puts his or her initials on the work slip. That way, if an issue is discovered later, it's easy to go back and correct the problem, learn what happened, and identify employees who may need more training.



Employees can earn rewards above and beyond their regular job wages as well. While there are many tile designs in the catalogue, co-founder Michael Pratt is the only employee with "designer" in his job description. All of the rest of the designs come from other employees in various jobs across the company. Interested employees can develop and submit their own original creations to Pratt for consideration, and the employees whose designs are selected for production receive a "royalty" on the sales for those designs. The whole system adds to the sense of company pride and ownership.

### Light and space and positive energy

Pratt & Larson's manufacturing facility has plenty of space to move and work, and lots of natural and supplemental light. Blind corners are nearly non-existent, and employees can easily maintain eye contact with one another.

The positive atmosphere extends beyond the working areas--at Pratt & Larson even the employee lunchroom is ergonomically designed. Besides the stylish industrial furniture, community dishes, and full kitchen, a large retractable door turns the room into an open-air cafe on nice days. With many visual artists on staff, artwork abounds, and several employee pieces adorn the lunchroom walls.

"People need to enjoy their life at work. The livability of the job has always been a major

factor," says HR Manager Mike DiMilla. "Michael (Pratt) and Reta (Larson) really believe that a strong employee culture creates a strong company."

DiMilla adds that another key component to the company's loyal workforce lies in its efforts to provide fair wages and paid benefits. Almost all employees are full-time, with fully paid medical/dental coverage and paid holidays.

### Communication and culture

"The safety culture at Pratt & Larson is really just based on good communication," says SAIF Loss Control Consultant Michelle Webb. "They have an attitude that they can tackle anything, whether it's retrofitting tools with ergonomic handles or custom-building a new kiln. They really view SAIF as a partner in their safety program. If they have an issue, they'll keep working with us until they resolve it."

To ensure that communication is effective, managers and supervisors share safety training and process improvements with employees verbally, with hands-on teaching and lots of small-group discussions. The company finds its "human" approach to communication works quite well.

"Person-to-person communication really works," says DiMilla. "The company tries to use all aspects of the job to help people enjoy their work and feel valued. When you do that, people work hard, they pay attention to their safety, and they look out for each other. We think it's a good way to run a business."