

The IBEW SPARQ

A quarterly newsletter highlighting IBEW values

Vol. 4 | Issue 1 | Winter 2020

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



Using—and Protecting—Your Head

A hard hat has to be strong enough to stand up to falling objects. But to be of any use, it also has to stay on your head. It seems like a simple job, long-ago solved with plastic and an internal head band. But what if it could work better, protect you more? It turns out your grandpa's hard hat is due for a much-needed upgrade.

“Chin straps,” said Chris Gulbrandson, business manager of Racine, Wisc., Local 430, talking about the rock-climbing style helmets required on Foxconn's 1-million-square-foot LCD manufacturing plant in Mount Pleasant. “Lean over to pick up a tool, it won't fall off. Fall backward off a lift, it won't fall off.”

It has taken some getting used to, he said, but changing something so familiar has been a hallmark of contractor Gilbane's approach to safety.

“Some say their safety culture is prohibitive. They expect so much,” Gulbrandson said. “But with the Code of Excellence, so do we.”

Other innovations at Foxconn include a personal RFID “beeper” device worn by every worker that makes sure everyone who enters the job site at the beginning of the day leaves at the end, notifies response crews when and where there is a fall and allows supervisors to send evacuation alerts to everyone if there is a safety incident or dangerous weather.



The safety equation includes planning, policies, implementation and protection—including personal protective equipment, said IBEW Safety and Health Department Director David Mullen.

“With each step down that list, the impact usually goes down,” Mullen said. “But when everything else is done right, a chin strap or a connected device on your toolbelt can make the kind of difference that saves lives.”

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.

