Safety Comes from the Top at Mollenberg-Betz

"Taking that extra 10 minutes for safety" is paying off handsomely for this mechanical-refrigeration contractor.

By Tom Cothran

Infusing a safety program into a construction company is a little like hammering a nail: The driving force has to come from the top. And a strong emphasis on worker safety does start at the top at Mollenberg-Betz in Buffalo, N.Y., a 90-year-old mechanical-refrigeration contractor headed by H. Van Mollenberg, a third-generation member of the founding family.

Mollenberg-Betz was founded in 1910 by Henry J. Mollenberg and Jacob Betz as a machine shop serving nearby shipping, steel mills, and other industries. Early on, the founders were asked to design and install a refrigeration system for a dairy, and for several decades the company designed and manufactured custom refrigeration systems for a variety of industrial and commercial customers. During the 1960s, the company branched out into heating, air conditioning, ventilating and process piping and began a service department. In 1985, Mollenberg-Betz discontinued its machine shop and created a fabrication facility for piping assemblies, which are shipped to the location where they are installed.

Projects change frequently, and at any given moment Mollenberg-Betz employs 75 to 150 welders and pipefitters at projects around the nation. Refrigeration systems remain a mainstay of the business. Recent projects include ice skating surfaces for the Buffalo Sabres and Colorado Avalanche hockey teams, a 5,500-ton cooling system for the Roswell Park Cancer Institute in Buffalo, and a low-temperature refrigeration system for Cheney Brothers of West Palm Beach, Fla., to name just a few.

Manufacturing and installing such systems present a number of potential safety hazards, including particles from welding and grinding operations and gas from chemicals, such as the ammonia used in refrigeration systems. Mollenberg-Betz has achieved a strong safety record, however, through education and strong leadership.

The company's renewed drive for safety began a few years ago, when Van Mollenberg attended a safety seminar and came home with a fundamental concept about worker protection. "Even if you have the best safety manager and a carefully written safety program, if the president of the company fails to advocate a comprehensive safety program and simply allows others to administer it without being personally involved, your safety program simply won't be effective," he asserts.

"This concept--while not new--was a real eye opener for me," he says. "That's when we decided that we had to become much more proactive regarding safety throughout all levels of the organization. Not that we hadn't been active with respect to worker safety, but we certainly weren't as proactive as we have become."
Mollenberg's renewed personal commitment to safety included ensuring that his employees receive regular, comprehensive safety training on all types of personal protective equipment (PPE) and best safety practices so they are more aware of the hazards around them, and are supplied with the best safety equipment. He also hired John Paytash as safety manager. Paytash previously was safety coordinator for a major national paint manufacturer and a member of the American Society of Safety Engineers and the National Safety Management Society.

Paytash quickly discovered the difference between safety programs on an industrial site--his previous experience--and safety on a construction site--his new environment. "In industry, you have a very controlled environment. Employees generally work in the same building, with the same people, and they do the same tasks every day," he says. "In construction, on the other hand, the work environment changes day by day, minute by minute."

**Getting the PPE Message Across**

Safety equipment at Mollenberg-Betz includes a variety of helmets, hoods, faceshields, respirators, gloves, and other PPE. Employees typically use a full facepiece respirator with ammonia cartridges when they are working on refrigeration units where low levels of ammonia (below the IDLH level of 500 ppm, the 1990 NIOSH value) may be present, or a half facepiece respirator with filters with nuisance level organic vapor relief for a variety of metalworking applications, such as welding. Workers prefer these respirators because they are lightweight and easy to use.

For grinding and other metal finishing applications, employees wear a particulate respirator that is comfortable and compatible with other face, head, and hearing protection. Paytash says training sometimes includes persuading employees to change long-standing habits and attitudes about safety. "Guys would come up to me at training sessions and say things like, 'We never knew why we were required to wear these respirators,' because the potential consequences of non-compliance hadn't been properly explained in the past," Paytash says.

He recalls the first time he invited Ron Gersbacher, a 3M sales representative with a long history in safety equipment, to lead some respirator training and fit testing. "The first year, some of the guys were pretty obnoxious with their questions and comments. I felt badly for Ron, because I've known him a long time. But this is the fourth year he has participated, and now the guys are asking much more informed questions. There has been a big change in attitude and receptiveness to the need to use respiratory protection."

Mollenberg-Betz has a safety committee. It includes Mollenberg, Paytash, and a member apiece from the service department, field construction, and fabrication shop, and a project manager. The committee keeps a running agenda of issues to discuss and organizes an annual safety training session and a presentation by outside safety professionals. The committee also keeps track of safety suggestions. "The guys realize that their input is valued if the safety committee acts on an issue or concern they brought up," says Mollenberg. "Once you do that, they say, 'These guys are serious. They listened to me.'

"We don't judge whether a suggestion is too costly. We judge the merits of the suggestion: Great ideas pay for themselves. If you listen to your people and they have good ideas, the ball will keep rolling forever."
Mollenberg says measuring whether safety contributes to the bottom line is hard to quantify, but he believes the contribution is significant. "If one of our employees is properly trained, is using appropriate PPE, feels comfortable and is working safely, that affects many aspects of productivity, which impacts profitability." he says.

"I think it positively impacts the bottom line," adds Paytash. "When I first came here, we had something like 16 or 18 recordable injuries that year. Last year we had only five. It's like an investment. It's going to pay dividends down the road, and I think we're only just starting to see dividends from our new emphasis on safety."

**Sharing Safety Activism**

Mollenberg-Betz also tries to help other companies and their employees through its safety activism. The company belongs to a local trade organization known as the Mechanical Contractors Association of Buffalo. Two years ago, with encouragement from Mollenberg, the association sought a cooperative arrangement with Local 22 of the Plumbers and Steamfitters Union. After some initial skepticism by union members about the contractors' true agenda, the union became "extremely proactive," says Mollenberg.

Working together, the contractors association and the local union designed a joint educational initiative. It features the logo "Pulling Together For Safety." The group also has arranged for speakers on safety and other topics and obtained a $75,000 grant from the state of New York to fund further training efforts.

Other unions began to show interest. Then, a regional industry training program was inaugurated, with each participant receiving 10 hours of training on basic safety knowledge applicable to many plants in western New York.

As part of his proactive commitment, Mollenberg makes presentations to new union apprentices. "As Mollenberg employees, I tell them if they're asked to do a job that will require an extra 10 minutes to do it safely--and someone tells them not to take the extra time--to come see me," he says. "And I say the same thing to my foremen. Take that extra 10 minutes for safety, because you just can't calculate the true costs when an accident occurs. An accident can shut down the job and cause all manner of unanticipated consequences. No one wants to imperil our employees."

Mollenberg-Betz sponsors its own safety seminar each year. The company gives prizes for safety performance, but Mollenberg believes in a somewhat more personal incentive program: a personal letter to each employee whose supervisor recommends him for demonstrating a strong commitment to safety. This personal recognition may also include being summoned to Mollenberg's office to receive a gift certificate for a fine dinner.

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Tom Cothran is a Minneapolis, Minn.-based freelance writer who reports on industrial health and safety issues. 3M™ Respirators 6000 Series and 8210 are featured in this article.