

## Getting Oriented

Start new employees on the right foot by providing meaningful orientation.

**T**ake a moment and think through what training and information your new employees receive before you send them to the floor. Do you provide training about your hazard communication program? Probably. Do you go through the employee handbook to make sure your new associates understand your company's rules and regulations? Likely. Do you inform them about your insurance programs, tell them where the lunch room is, make sure they understand your break schedule? I'm guessing you do.

Does this program really help your new team members understand the potential safety risks of working in a manufacturing or surface finishing environment? Does it leave them with an understanding of the value you provide to your customers and the end users of the products you paint, coat, clean or plate? Once the employee orientation is complete, are your new employees fully immersed in your company's culture, and fired up and energized to dive into the job? I'll let you answer that question for yourself.

Several years ago a new employee began working at a surface finishing company I know well. Prior to heading out to the shop floor, he was run through the standard employee orientation program.

He received his hazard communication training, reviewed the employee handbook and spent some time with HR learning about benefits. He was then sent out to the shop floor for his "hands on training"—which translated roughly to: "put him to work and hope something sticks."

He was assigned to a small automated production line that performed chromate conversions on aluminum substrates. About an hour later the machine operator on the line noticed that a substrate was sitting crooked on the rack designed to hold it. The rack was sitting in a rinse tank that steadily flowed clean water. The machine operator reached into the tank and placed the part in its proper position on the rack, knowing that he was reaching into a tank of harmless water.

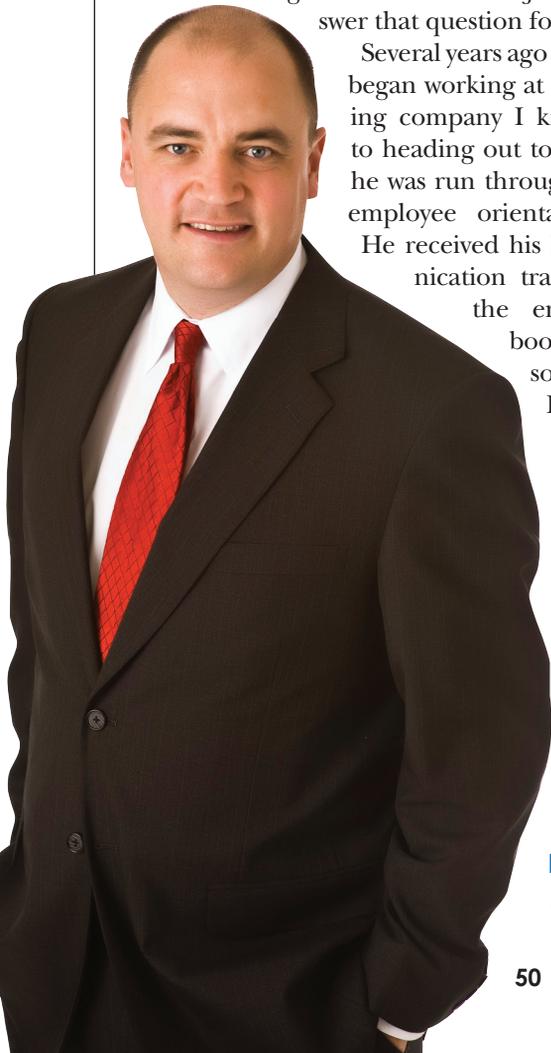
Fast forward 60 min. The new employee—the one who had completed his orientation only hours before—noticed another part sitting crooked on a rack. Having seen the operator reach into a tank and reposition a part, the new employee took the initiative to do the same thing. This particular rack, however, wasn't sitting in a tank of water but rather in a tank of diluted acid. Fortunately, the acid burns on the new employee's skin were mild and the he was only out for a matter of days. It could have been much worse.

This experience demonstrates one way the employer's orientation program missed the mark. The employee was "trained" in hazard communication, but the inherent risks in a finishing environment were not adequately impressed on the employee.

An ideal employee orientation program starts with the message that a surface finishing environment is a very safe place to work, as long as safe practices are followed. This means that all employees truly understand how to read hazard communication labels, they take the time to read them, they follow safety related rules and regulations, and never assume anything but instead always ask before they act if there is even a shadow of doubt about whether a certain practice is safe.

Other messages to consider sending in a new employee orientation for surface finishers include:

**Customer parts are sacred.** Every finisher has horror stories about customer parts. In my years in the industry I have seen or heard of damaged customer substrates hidden in the plant by offending operators afraid to own up to mistakes, a lawn mower blade to be coated for one customer being used to remove the plastic wrap from another customer's shipping pallet, parts being launched into



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shipping containers from a dozen feet away, and scrap dumpsters full of customer parts that fell into tanks during processing and were never recovered. Customer parts have significant value to the customer and do not belong to the finisher. If something that doesn't belong to us is entrusted to our care we have an absolute obligation to return it.

**If you're not sure, don't put it in the box.** A customer once called me about a shipment of non-conforming product she received from a plant I managed. We traced the load back to a specific operator. "How could you let this out the door?" I asked. "I didn't think I would get caught," was the reply. Employees must understand from the start that providing good quality is at the heart of what we do and anything less is intolerable.

**Productivity matters.** The formula for the productivity of a coating line is pretty simple. Maximize parts per rack or barrel, optimize line speed, and keep the yield of quality parts as high as possible. If an employee allows parts to go around and around the line, or removes them and nonchalantly tosses them in the rework pile without saying anything it's clear that productivity isn't particularly important to them. Train new employees on what productivity means and why it's important.

**Culture counts.** What are the attitudes, beliefs and behaviors that the company values most and how are employees expected to live up to them?

Looking to upgrade the quality of your workforce? Don't just go through the motions. Start new team members off on the right foot by providing a meaningful new employee orientation program. ■



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