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Robert DiFulgentiz, president of Wichita-based Koch-Glitsch, has a passion for workplace safety.

As a career engineer and Koch employee since 1984, he is no stranger to the reality of risk in the workplace. And as a manager in petrochemical manufacturing -- an industry known for dangerous workplaces -- DiFulgentiz leads a company that has become known for its culture of safety.

Three years ago, Koch-Glitsch was awarded STAR workplace status by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration in recognition of its safety record and level of steady improvement. Last month, the company was named to Occupational Hazards magazine's list of America's safest companies.

The company, a wholly owned subsidiary of Koch Industries, manufactures mass transfer and mist elimination products for the chemical, petrochemical, refining, gas processing, pharmaceutical and specialty industries. In addition, Koch-Glitsch conducts research and development.

DiFulgentiz started his Koch career as a process engineer in Koch Engineering. He became vice president of John Zink Co. after Koch acquired that business in 1989 and was managing director for John Zink Europe from 1993 to 1996 before becoming president of Koch Engineering. He has been president of Koch-Glitsch since the merger of Koch Engineering and Glitsch in 1997.

Can you describe how your company went about developing this culture of safety?

"We believe that a good safety culture is a critical requirement for long-term success. Plus, it is simply the right thing to do for employees.

"It requires strong commitment from all levels of management. The employees have to know, and really believe, that management is committed to safety and safety comes first. Safety must be more important than profits. Our employees at Koch-Glitsch believe this, and they act accordingly."

Do you think your approach would work as well in another type of company as it does in manufacturing?

"Yes, I do. The key to safety improvement is the team approach. Everyone owns safety at Koch-Glitsch. If I even thought about walking out on our manufacturing floor without the appropriate safety gear, I'd be written up by 10 employees within 10 seconds. When every team member has that focus, I believe this culture can be replicated in any kind of work environment."

How has the emphasis on safety changed the day-to-day work environment for employees?

"Our employees care for each other, and they show it in their daily actions. Each person can describe the risks associated with every activity and how they manage and mitigate those risks. Employees know they are never expected to, or allowed to, work in an unsafe environment and that they have the authority and responsibility to stop any unsafe operation at any time.

"Employee ownership of safety takes time, and our employees spend a significant amount of work time on safety -- away from their normal duties. Our employees perform between 4,000 and 5,000 proactive safety measures each month, including behavior observations, safety inspections, job hazard assessments and root cause analyses."

Can you talk a little bit about how you've gotten employees to buy into this philosophy?

"Employee ownership is the most important aspect of a world-class safety culture. In order to get that, you need management commitment. That commitment is not achieved through policies, memos, mission statements, speeches or reports. It is only achieved through management action. Management must consistently 'walk the talk.'

"Once our employees knew management was serious, it was easy to get them to become owners of the safety process."

What has Koch-Glitsch gained, business-wise, from the safety initiative?

"I believe that the organizational discipline required to attain OSHA Star Status or be named one of America's safest companies is the same discipline required to excel in other areas of operational excellence.

"Over the past four years, since we had the stepchange in our safety culture, we have seen our quality, on-time shipping, cycle time and productivity all improve dramatically. A good safety program and culture is good business."

What is next on your safety agenda?

"We cannot become arrogant or complacent. We must demonstrate humility and keep working hard on our safety program. It is a journey that never ends. We can never be good enough.

"Koch-Glitsch has two other manufacturing sites in the United States and 10 others around the world. The Wichita site is leading the way, and we will work hard to establish the same culture in our other facilities. In fact, our Dallas site was recommended earlier this year for Star Status."

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