

By Rebecca Patrick

Eaton Corporation

Breaking the Mold

Precious few manufacturing companies have ever made the Best Places to Work in Indiana list (a lack of applicants being the primary reason).

For first-time honoree Eaton Corporation, it's just another instance of bucking the stereotype.

The South Bend facility, which has 115 teammates – not employees, as management is quick to tell you – does forgings for heavy-duty assembly plants and the automotive market. The Hoosier operation is infused with policies from corporate (in Cleveland) mixed with a distinctive local imprint.

Setting the tone

Eaton operates under five basic concepts: always safety, trust, communication, mutual respect and involvement.

“These are the expectations of everyone in the plant. It helps keep us harmonized and focused, but also allows for flexibility when needed,” explains HR generalist Peggy Johnson, who has been with the company 24 years.

Developmental coach Dave Keesler says that flexibility and belief system is appreciated and recognized as “unique” for a manufacturer.

“We don't necessarily track teammates by a time clock. There is a trust and belief that you are here when you are supposed to be here and you are doing your job. You don't have to have anyone over your back cracking a whip.”

Plant manager David Larkins pushes back on having a top-down management style. Instead, he calls the Eaton way a “bottom-up approach. That's absolutely critical. Having teammates in the facility come up with innovative ideas and provide them with a platform to innovate has made us successful.”

This inclusiveness also extends to key decision-making.

“We'll shut down and sit around (discussing it). If it's a critical decision, they involve everyone,” relays Josh Stoops, a developmental coach. “It's not, ‘This is what you're going to do; deal with it.’ They make sure everyone is on board.”



Among Eaton's appreciation programs: monthly recognition for having the best ideas that reduce cost.



Teammates are involved in the interview process and have been trained in assessment and selection, shares Peggy Johnson.

Career path you choose

Two of the employees we spoke with – Stoops and Keesler – have worked their way up to their current roles at Eaton. That type of progression is encouraged.

“The idea for every teammate that comes through the door is you continue to develop yourself,” Keesler offers. “You have set skill blocks for each position. Once those are reached, you can look to the next set and position.”

Adds Russ Basham, a technical support specialist and 19-year Eaton veteran: “It's not the type of place where you are going to spend your whole life screwing this screw into this hole on everything that comes down the assembly line. There are a lot of opportunities for advancement.”

A large part of that ability to progress professionally is tied to a generous tuition assistance program – \$5,250 per year for undergraduate coursework and \$7,500 annually for graduate studies.

“That opportunity is open for everybody. I think anyone who wants to take advantage of it does,” Johnson notes.

“It's one of my favorite things (about Eaton). Just last year I received my bachelor's degree. That was a major accomplishment for me.”

HR manager Jordan Musselman, who has also worked at three other Eaton facilities, shares, “Eaton has given me opportunities to grow and better myself. There is no reason I would go work anywhere else. I'm also not going to find better people to work with.”

Compassion and passion

Giving back to the community is another welcome

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practice at Eaton – one you can tell the teammates are proud of and helps further cement their camaraderie.

Eaton teammates – all by themselves – donated more than \$20,000 last year to the United Way.

They also took advantage of a funding opportunity from corporate for projects a plant “deems very necessary in your community that will improve it,” Larkins describes. The result was \$20,000 to construct a playground for children at the South Bend Center for the Homeless. And it wasn’t just the monetary assistance; Eaton personnel helped build it.

This caring quality ties into what Larkins asks of his staff in the workplace.

“We need to make sure that we have compassion for our people ... that we are always making sure the people inside and outside the facility are taken care of. If someone is struggling, the first thing they should ask is, ‘Is everything OK?’ ” he asserts.

Larkins also asks everyone in the facility “to have a passion for what they do.”

That push resonates loud and clear, according to Stoops.

“When everyone around you is pushing 100% to be the best, it brings the best out in you.”



In addition to more traditional benefits, a large meal is provided for all shifts each quarter.