

DSM Coating Resins Safety, Empowerment Yield Winning Workplace

By Matt L. Ottinger



When speaking with team members at this Frankfort manufacturer, one theme is consistently reinforced: safety first. The company boasts an array of Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) certifications and some simply remarkable accomplishments.

In fact, if this year concludes without a major accident, the global resins supplier will celebrate 11 years without an OSHA recordable (incident) and 25 years without a lost-time accident. That culture of safety not only keeps employees out of harm, but it also keeps them engaged.

“We’re open to speak our mind about safety,” asserts shift leader Jason Coleman, a Frankfort area native who’s been with the company for 17 years. “If you don’t have that communication between people, the atmosphere tends to be a little rough. Everybody from the top level down knows what they’re expected to do and everything is well planned from beginning to end.”

DSM (headquartered in the Netherlands and a provider of solutions for paints, coatings, composite materials and fiber optic coatings) is also certified as an OSHA STAR location – the highest level of certification for a chemical site – and is an OSHA Voluntary Protection Program member. According to site manager Ben Hopkins, having a focus on safety requires serious commitment.

“One thing we say around here is we’ll never jeopardize safety for profit,” he relays. “We really want our employees to go home the same way they came in every day. That takes a lot of effort and money; there’s a lot of investment to maintain that safety.”

Power of the people

He also explains that the key to garnering a collective buy-in is combining that attention to safety with an empowerment of employees.

“We have high employee involvement – and that’s through a suggestion program,” Hopkins says. “All the employees can offer suggestions to make it safer. If they see something that could’ve happened in the plant, they can go on our intranet and submit a ‘near miss’ report about something they think could’ve possibly happened.”

He adds that the company then addresses the concern to determine how a worst-case scenario could be prevented.

“That really helps build ownership of employees at the site,” Hopkins notes. “They know their voices are being heard and that they are an asset to the company. They take ownership in making sure their environment is safe.”

DSM also has a focus on inspirational leadership, external orientation and accountability for performance. The former allows each employee to be a leader at his or her level.

“We empower them to make decisions,” Hopkins remarks, stating they can stop contractors or production if they feel an unsafe practice is occurring.

Incentive and investments

In addition to empowerment, incentive is a prime motivator. When annual and milestone safety achievements are realized, employees are rewarded with amenities like gift cards. They were recently given fleece jackets sporting the DSM and OSHA VPP logos. Additionally, if the 2012 safety objectives and long-term milestones are achieved, staff will be rewarded with a Monte Carlo casino-themed evening.

Staff is also encouraged – and paid – to make a personal time investment in improving their work environment.

“One of the things we’re doing this year is a Care Package,” Hopkins explains. “It’s something they’re passionate about, and we allow them 16 to 24 hours each quarter to spend on that with pay. It’s not a normal work activity; it’s just something to show their care for the plant, maybe improving

When DSM’s Frankfort site recently achieved the milestone of 10 years without a recordable OSHA incident, employees and their families celebrated with games, food, plant tours and an awards ceremony.



something around their area – painting, cleaning or installing equipment to make the area more efficient.”

Hopkins adds that the plant itself is striving to make more investments in the community. This year, the company is giving \$1,000 scholarships to the four area high schools (Frankfort, Rossville, Clinton Central and Clinton Prairie) to be awarded to graduating seniors who are pursuing work in chemical or safety, health and environmental industries.

The company also invests in wellness.

“We’ll reimburse an employee up to \$300 if they buy fitness equipment or a YMCA membership, for example,” Hopkins says, adding the company spends about \$100 to \$150 weekly to stock its break room refrigerator with fruits and vegetables. “We also have lunch-and-learns about every other month, where a speaker comes in and talks about things like ergonomics, sleep habits and fitness.”

A family affair

DSM also has quarterly communication meetings, during which the facility is shut down and all employees are taken off-site.

“There are team building exercises, meals, a special sales and marketing speaker from DSM comes in and talks about where our products are being used,” Hopkins conveys. “We’ll also have some training and some fun to get people laughing together. It gives them some time away from work and puts them in a forum where we can talk with each other.”

Kevin Goodnight, the company’s U.S. safety, health and environmental manager, oversees safety at four DSM locations throughout the country.

“I was the very first operator hired at this site, and I’ve been here 25 years,” he recalls, stating the company’s culture has



Emulsion technicians in DSM’s control room operate the DCS system, which regulates and monitors the batch process. Attention to detail has been a critical component of DSM’s stellar safety record through the years.

kept him loyal to the plant. “What I think is really different about us is the quality of the people and the chemistry of the group that we have here. I liken it to a Super Bowl championship team, where you just have that type of chemistry where everything works well for you.”

Above all, he explains the reason he still enjoys coming to work each day is the culture and the safety that results from the tremendous unity.

“We watch out for each other; we care about each other; we know each other’s families,” Goodnight offers. “Many of us have worked here for a number of years so we’ve kind of grown up together. It makes it a unique family type of atmosphere. That caring for one another really helps you stay safe – not only for yourself – but you’re watching out for everyone else too.”