

Draper, Inc.

Achievement is All in the Atmosphere

By Tom Schuman

Draper is a large company in a small town that operates in a global environment. It is one of the few manufacturers to earn a Best Places to Work designation, doing so while admittedly “preferring to cut a lower profile.”

The bond that ties all these factors together is family. Draper, with nearly 500 employees in Spiceland in Henry County, is under the fourth generation of family ownership in its 108-year history.

“The majority of the people live within 15 minutes of the plant,” notes John Pidgeon, president and great-grandson of company founder Luther Draper.

Pidgeon started with the company 41 years ago on the same day as his cousin, Mike Broome, who heads up the manufacturing operations. Broome’s two sons are part of the organization. “We employ a lot of members of the same family. It’s been a family atmosphere as long as I’ve been here. The employees are a closely knit group.”

Debbie Searcy, accounts receivable & traffic manager and a 33-year veteran of the organization, says, “In thinking about this, the one thing I always kept coming back to was respect. The owners and upper management have respect for us as employees, but also as people. I could sit here for three days and tell you how this company has affected me personally.”

Lance Howe, employed in the shipping area for six years, points out that the “family atmosphere” is a common selling point for employees. “Here, they really mean it and you believe it. I’ve had my eyes opened to a lot of things.”

And Cory Knight, a three-year employee in contract sales, sighs and claims the “list is endless” when asked what makes Draper a great place to work. He goes on to cite the never-ending assistance of his boss, “excellent benefits and co-workers. It is a family. We all realize if we help one another, we’re helping the customers in the end.”

By the way, there has never been an employee layoff in the 108-year history that started with manufacturing window shades for schools. Projection screens and a variety of gymnasium equipment are now part of the mix. Products are shipped to dealers throughout the United States and more than 100 foreign countries.

“We’re family-owned and managed, relatively conservative and always try to take a long-range view of any situation,” Pidgeon offers.

With that said, adding a health care clinic for workers and their dependents in early 2007 “was one of the most popular things we’ve ever done. It’s helped both the company and employees, mitigating the increases (in costs) for both of us.”

More than 90% of insureds utilize the services. In addition to treatment for regular illnesses and injuries, physicians emphasize (along with a formulary of generic drugs free to the patients) taking care of chronic conditions. In 2009 the company added a popular five-acre wellness park to promote active, healthy lifestyles.

Employees receive an annual profit sharing check and numerous other bonus programs are tied to group and team goals. There are various examples of open communications and Howe cites rapid improvement events (in which he and others are consulted on “what’s going to make our job easier”) that boost productivity and morale.

And then there’s that family thing. Draper sponsors youth sports teams when employees’ children are participating. It not only contributes to the local Dollars for Scholars program but has set up ongoing scholarships, Searcy reports. And she adds that the company “does everything in its power” to hire college-age children of employees for summer positions or even on school breaks.

“I’ve learned,” she concludes, “that they (company owners) always try to take care of us.”



The Draper spelling bee team celebrates its success. The annual company meeting brings all employees together at the Spiceland Gym.