

Getting a tobacco free workplace policy: the case of Acme Industries, Oregon

Company history

Acme Industries is a small manufacturing, sales, and distribution company that specializes in unique products for everyday household use by independent, freedom-loving Oregonians. The company was founded in 1929 by Calamity Coyote, in defiance of the economic crisis in America. He felt that Oregonians could survive and thrive through The Depression if they had the tools they needed for their frontier lifestyle. In 1968, while the rest of the country was in political and cultural upheaval, his eldest son, Wile E. Coyote took over as President of Acme, vowing to continue to provide the goods that Oregonians needed to maintain their culture in rural and frontier regions. Best-selling products included anvils, boomerangs, glue, invisible paint, matches, and rocket-powered roller skates.

Company Demographics

Employees:

- 45 full time, 15 part time
- 60% male, 40% female
- Mean age – 47
- 92% Caucasian, 6% Latino, 2% Asian American

30% of the staff are in manufacturing, represented by the machinists union

40% of the staff are in office positions, represented by the office workers union

30% of the staff have no union representation (10% management, 20% sales)

Average salary - \$39,000 (range \$18,000 – ‘undisclosed’)

Educational attainment - 20% college degrees, 10% some college, 55% high school, 15% no high school

Setting:

Acme Industries is in a rural Oregon community, housed in three locations. The Home Office has 10 staff and is in the same location in which it was started in 1929, on Main Street. Historically most products were shipped to customers, but after several ‘safety incidents’ (primarily related to user error), a storefront was added in the

1960's. This allowed customers to handle the products before they purchased them, and in some cases, receive training on how to use them.

About a half mile away, 2 blocks off Main Street, the Sales Office is housed in a small office building, shared by two other businesses. One business is shared by a group of therapists who see clients for help with family issues, addictions, and career counseling. The other is a private technical school aimed at giving young adults job skills. The Sales Office has 12 employees, but 6 of them are part time.

The rest of the employees are based at the manufacturing and distribution location. It is 3 miles out of town, in a remote office park that supports truck and rail transportation of products. It is the only business on the property. There are other manufacturing facilities in the area because of the transportation infrastructure.

The 3 office locations operate very independently, despite being part of the same company. The Home Office and Sales Office feel more like small businesses than part of the larger Acme Industries.

Company culture

Acme Industries was founded on the values of freedom, independence, and self-sufficiency. At a time when the country was suffering through the Great Depression, Calamity Coyote risked what little he had to provide products, as well as jobs, to his friends and neighbors who were carving out a life in frontier Oregon. He took risks and worked very hard, and expected the same from his employees. He was a rare success at that time, and when World War II came about, he found his largest customer for his unique 'consumer goods' – Uncle Sam. Business 'boomed'.

After the war, the unions came in to organize the employees, as the company continued to grow. This was a huge challenge and threat to the culture of the organization. Many people did not feel union representation was needed, especially the Coyote family. However, the unions prevailed. Employees still felt the power of Calamity, and his family but they also felt some relief in knowing they had some basic protections.

By the time Wile E. took over in 1968, events in the national landscape (the Draft, the Viet Nam war, Civil Rights, Women's Rights, and the counter culture) seemed to have little effect on Acme Industries. The core values of hard work, independence and

personal freedom remained. Although some people were seeing that a ‘personal freedom’ could benefit one person, while taking away from others.

Currently, the workforce is the smallest it has been since 1938. It is still a privately held company, with decisions made by Wile E. and his top level managers, three of whom are his sons-in-law. The company survives, but is very ‘lean’ and workers often feel overworked and stressed. Competition from foreign companies, and product safety concerns have led to losses over the past few years. Employees know there are few other employment options in their community, so they work as hard as they can and try to maintain a low profile. Fortunately, the union contract requires that employees take breaks. This allows people a chance to socialize and support each other, which for many, is what gets them through the day.

Tobacco use at Acme Industries

The Indoor Clean Air Act is being implemented, after several complaints prompted enforcement action by the County Health Department. Wile E. is a smoker and was not happy to give up his ‘personal freedom’ to smoke in his office, even while his secretary was pregnant. He has since switched to chew, and offers it to anyone he meets with, as a symbol of his hospitality and generosity.

Outside the Main Office and store front on Main Street, there is a shaded bench and ashtray for the use of customers and employees. Wile E. views this as an opportunity for the sales staff to spend more time with customers, to build the relationship to enhance sales. Members of the public walking past can see this ‘conviviality’ and are encouraged to join the conversation, with the hope of luring in more customers. Sales staff often offer cigarettes to people to get them to stay longer.

At the Sales Office there are covered benches that employees from Acme and the other businesses use as smoking area. There are no ashtrays to indicate it is intended as a smoking area, but that is what it has become. There is a picnic table in the courtyard, but people often smoke there too. Employees who wish to take breaks or eat outside have nowhere to go on the property where they will not smell smoke.

Tobacco use at the manufacturing and distribution facility is ubiquitous. There are comfortable smoking shelters, as fought for by the union in the 1990’s, and there is almost always someone in them. Truck drivers typically stand at the entrance to the loading dock to smoke and chat with others while orders are being loaded. It is not unusual to see spit cups next to the machines for the operators to use during the day.

Now that they can no longer smoke while working indoors, many have switched to chew.

The Call For Help

As the local tobacco control coordinator, you have been contacted by Penelope, an entry level supervisor based at the Sales Office. She has two staff members who complain about the lack of smoke-free outdoor space at their office. One of them is also worried that her father, who works at the manufacturing site, has taken up chew, even though his doctor told him he needs to quit tobacco. Penelope is hesitant to shake things up, but her own father, who worked his entire career for Calamity, retired 3 years ago from Acme, only to die from lung cancer 2 years later. Calamity used to include a carton of cigarettes in the annual employee Christmas package, so her father took up smoking.

It is in your workplan to work with at least one workplace to adopt and implement a tobacco free policy. Here is your opportunity!