

Press Release

AES's people: the most important asset in the delivery of energy efficiency and safety

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As the country's most experienced operations and maintenance (O & M) service providers in the local steam and boiler sector, Associated Energy Services (AES) serves multiple industries including power generation, chemicals, plastics and rubber, timber, pulp and paper, textiles, food and beverage, dairy, poultry and mining – all of which are pivotal to South Africa's economy. This means mission-critical responsibilities when it comes to the operational efficiency and safety of plants, and is closely aligned with AES's most important asset: the company's people.

"Our people make our business possible. They *are* AES – and we invest heavily in the training and promotion of talented team members on an equal opportunity basis. We take care of our people and, in so doing, our clients," explains AES Commercial Director, Dennis Williams.

He unpacks this: "Essentially, our people are on our clients' sites, representing us 24/7. Their actions and decisions impact first and foremost on our clients. However, they do naturally impact on our business too. That is why there needs to be a congruency with our values, ethos and broader operational culture. Team members execute their activities in full view of our clients.

Our people are at the 'coalface' of our clients' plants and directly impact their success: ensuring risk reduction, asset preservation, safety management, energy efficiency and improvement of steam supply uptime. To this end, we have key metrics and measurable outcomes in our service level agreements – and were the first in the industry to offer our well-known AES performance guarantee."

Effectiveness meets safety

As AES staff members operate sophisticated mechanical and electrical machinery, they not only need to be well trained, but also empowered to do their jobs both effectively and safely:

"The generation and supply of steam requires specialist skills because the team is working with items of equipment – such as boilers - that are under pressure and therefore potentially dangerous. The inherent risks and operational protocols need to be well understood," Williams adds.

He points out that the range of equipment required to generate steam is extensive and ranges from electrical equipment such as pumps, motors, mechanical equipment, stokers, fans and the boiler itself – as well as coal and biomass conveyor systems for fuel management and mechatronic systems such as the boiler control system, which supports automatic control of the boiler. A wide range of different skills is therefore equally important.

“We focus intensively on the ability of our staff to perform to a high standard – even without direct or close supervision. We also develop our people to a point where they are rewarded by self-development and actualisation – and are coming to work for something more than only their salaries. Their careers need to be fulfilling and, in that way, we have employees who are driven and motivated to take accountability and excel in what they do,” he explains.

Consistently building relationships

Although Williams admits that there is still much to be done in the training and development of skills he says that the AES success story hinges on consistently building relationships with staff, motivating them and demonstrating in tangible ways that the business is committed to their development.

“Identifying opportunities for mentoring and growth within the business goes far beyond simply conveying knowledge and basic skills and encompasses creating a career path. Those at the cleaner, operator or assistant level are employed on the understanding that, if they show the required interest and capability, they will grow with the business,” he advises.

AES Operations Director Cuan Watkins concurs, asserting that there is no better learning than ‘on the job’: “A fitter or a millwright may have a tertiary education and the necessary qualifications to be appointed, but he or she still needs to assimilate the things that cannot be taught outside the organisation.”

When it comes to operators, all are trained within AES by skilled Training Officers and Supervisors. This begins with both theoretical and practical modules which are developed internally, followed by on-the-job training. Operators then shadow an experienced boiler operator for a while until such time as they can perform their duties to the required standard.

“Employees who have acquired their skills on the job are typically happy and motivated, as this takes the stress away from having to guess what they need to do in a particular circumstance. If something goes wrong, they know what to do and act accordingly” Watkins asserts.

He points out that a fulfilled employee mainly remains motivated - and that this translates directly into proactive performance, with minimal intervention needed.

Motivation is also ensured through frequent formal and informal interaction, with management frequently engaging with teams on-site, and a continuous stream of communication at all levels.

Experience and knowledge a key differentiator

At a time when South Africa is in dire need of specialist skills, being at experienced at both creating and retaining these gives AES considerable competitive advantage.

Williams says that, although input from external services providers is needed for accreditation purposes in some instances, the company quickly realised that one of its greatest assets was the experience and knowledge which lay at the heart of its business.

It therefore became important to document the extensive skills within the business as modules and training courses. However, this is a 'moving target', with constant upgrades to ensure that AES's "resource library and memory bank" remains relevant.

He adds that "change is a constant" due to technological changes, developments in-house and upgrades of boiler controls necessitated by changing fuel types.

"All these elements are incorporated, and an agile training and skills development regime is created. For example, at a dairy client where we are operating with biomass and biogas on site, a completely different training regime is required than at another site where they run a coal-fired boiler.

"Our training resources have been constantly improved and adjusted by various changes in the marketplace as well as bolstered by our ISO 9001, 14001 and 45001 requirements. A management system adds specific elements to your policies and procedures - and training is a big part of that. Once again, the variety of fuel type experience we have distinguishes us from competitors," he says.

Training the trainers

Training Officers and Supervisors are appointed from within the ranks of boiler operators. Williams says natural leaders are quickly identified by their conduct and operational skills. It is important to not only ensure that experienced personnel do the training but that each training officer has his or her own succession plan.

Again, AES takes a similar approach and, with the assistance of an industrial psychologist, has formulated a comprehensive training programme for training officers that includes modules covering motivation, HR discipline and the transition from specialist to supervisor and technical specialist and then to coach and counsellor.

Watkins emphasises that AES wants to be seen as a preferred employer based on the premise that people want to stay with the company.

At the same time, AES has identified key people within the company and constantly works on retaining them through regular engagement and communication to identify any potential workplace or personal issues. “We take the emotional temperature of our people. This speaks to the ethos of AES as being very people-focused,” he says.

He notes that all boiler operators are assessed for skills and competency annually and re-accredited every three years. Where skills gaps are identified, these are dealt with on an as-required basis. Succession planning and Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) requirements are also closely aligned with this.

He also adds that working within a pressurised economy does present some specific challenges. As input costs have impacted on clients’ production costs, operations and relationships have become more challenging. Successful management thereof is achieved through AES’s people - who remain the company’s key asset and differentiating factor.

A journey to success

Gratitude Masilo, Human Resources Manager for Gauteng, has had a career journey which reflects the extent to which a capable and talented employee can evolve within AES:

He began working for AES in early 2009 when the company took over a site on which he was working. Just a few months later, he was promoted to the position of Regional Staff Supervisor in KZN.

“This exposed me to a far wider array of boiler and energy technologies, ultimately resulting in my promotion to the position of National Training Manager where I ensured that all operators were certified, training was done consistently, the correct training materials were available and that capable training officers were identified and appointed,” Masilo explains.

Just three years later, he was appointed Human Resources Manager and then Operations Manager. His extensive technical knowledge combined effectively with an affinity for working with people, and Masilo has since returned to his position as Human Resources Manager.

As such, he believes that training is the most important part of his job. His role extends from selection and induction of new staff to staff co-ordination, management and more.

“AES specialises in identifying talent, so those are the people with whom I spend the most time. I nurture them, ensuring they learn the AES way and culture. Whenever there is an opportunity to grow within the company, staff need to be prepared to grow within that culture,” he says.

At the same time, Masilo says, the company's caring and people-centric approach during regular site visits helps to address this.

At all sites, teamwork also plays an important part as team members take responsibility for all eventualities:

"An advantage is having good relationships with our people on site. We encourage the mutual identification and solving of problems. We are all part of the solution when a problem arises! The trainers and the supervisors with whom I work all have different qualities. I know who to call if I need to someone to talk to staff - or provide leadership. People complement each other. That is what helps to successfully address challenges and makes AES the strong, people-orientated company which it is," he concludes.

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Note to Editors:

AES is a pioneering, innovative, reliable and experienced steam and boiler operations and maintenance (O & M) service provider. The company has been in existence for over 25 years and is widely regarded as the leading O & M provider in steam and boiler operations and maintenance service in South Africa. Target industry sectors include power generation, chemical, plastics and rubber, timber, pulp and paper, textiles, food and beverage, dairy, poultry and mining.

AES's purpose is to assist industrial plants to optimise their energy production processes, and achieve energy usage best practices, through the following offerings: the mitigation of risk and the reduction of plant downtime; the procurement of efficient fuel combustion; assistance with the care of assets over the plant's lifetime; diversification of the plant's energy resources; improvement in site operations; and a reduction in carbon footprint.

AES subscribes to the highest ethics and operates according to high safety standards, process excellence and product and service innovation, exhibiting a commitment to quality, technology advancement and the development of human capital. AES invests heavily in training and the promotion of talented people on an equal opportunity basis into the industrial operations environment. The company believes that making a positive difference to communities and the environment is the best way to ensure that everyone benefits from good work.

AES is ISO 9001, 14001 and 45001-certified, ensuring that the company maintains a focus on achieving, benchmarking and optimising its processes and activities.

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