



## Podcast Transcript | *The Fix*

### Season 2, Episode 7

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**Guests:** Maureen Pansky and Brian Lippert

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**Katherine:** Welcome to *The Fix*, the podcast made for the trades, where we sit down with inspiring individuals across the trades to discuss their unique take on the industry, including career paths, job site stories, overcoming challenges, and everything in between. I'm your host, Katherine, a marketer here at Oatey with my co-host and friend Doug, one of Oatey's resident experts in all things trades.

*The Fix* is more than a podcast. It's a community. A community built to support tradespeople and inspire the next generation of essential pros. Let's start the conversation. Doug, we have brought in the Oatey dream team today.

**Doug:** I'm going to tell you something, Katherine. Most people go through their whole life trying to find those little things that make them feel complete. 50 yards away from *The Fix* studio, we found two of those gems.

**Katherine:** You've got it. I'm so happy to have two guests on today. Maureen Pansky, our manager senior facility human resources at Cleveland Manufacturing as well as our director of operations at our Cleveland Manufacturing facility. Welcome guys.

**Brian:** Thank you.

**Maureen:** Thank you.

**Katherine:** We are so excited to have you on *The Fix* and to talk about this whole other side of the trades and in manufacturing and the roles and opportunities that are

there. If you wouldn't mind Maureen, I'll start with you. If you can give us a quick intro into your role and your tenure here at Oatey.

**Maureen:** Thank you, Katherine. I've been with Oatey eight years. Actually, it'll be eight years in another week and a half. I've been with the manufacturing plant for six of those years. I did spend my first two years in the distribution center, which is just about a mile down the road. What I do in the HR space is I work with a great team and we're running the gamut of the kinds of things that we practice with human resources from associate relations to recruiting, always trying to make sure we have an engaged workforce and a great place to work.

Again, what's near and dear to my hat is the workforce and talent development. Just what we're going to talk about today.

**Katherine:** Awesome. That's why it's a great fit. Brian, can you give us a little bit about your role and how long you've been here at Oatey?

**Brian:** Sure. It looks like we, Maureen and I have a very similar anniversary date. My two-year anniversary's coming up another week or two.

**Katherine:** Great.

**Brian:** I've been with Oatey that amount of time, two years coming up as the director of operations for our Cleveland Manufacturing facility, but my whole career has been in manufacturing. This topic is right up my alley.

**Doug:** Nice.

**Katherine:** That's right. Tell us a little bit about your role, Brian at the manufacturing facility. What do you oversee?

**Brian:** I basically oversee the full gamut of operations, everything it takes for this facility to operate, and put out the products that our customers need that starts with safety every day. Falling closely by quality but after that, it's all about hitting the budget, making the product that needs to be made when it needs to be made efficiently as possible. That's my main role in working as a partner with Maureen to develop our workforce and make this a wonderful place to work.

**Katherine:** You got it. Let's talk a little bit about our workforce. Can you expand on the diversity of opportunity working within manufacturing from administrative to safety, to skilled technicians?

**Brian:** It's actually one of the really cool parts about being in manufacturing. All businesses have finance, they all have sales and marketing. They all have HR and even legal, but manufacturing has engineering. They have mechanics, they have electricians, they have supply chain, they have material handling. They have a lot more broad opportunities than most industries have, which makes it really fun. It makes it challenging because you have more balls to juggle, but it's very rewarding from that perspective.

**Katherine:** That's great. Maureen, talk to us a little bit from your HR perspective. What do you see about some of the big opportunities over in manufacturing?

**Maureen:** Just to echo what Brian was saying, opportunities are really without limit. Both horizontally as well as vertically along the operations production lines, leadership and all the technical skills that are where credentials might be earned and required to advance. I'll give you some great examples of a person who started off as a production operator and this production operator didn't speak much English when he started. Through working with Oatey, working and excelling at his job, he was promoted.

He utilized our great tuition reimbursement program over his tenure here and earned a couple of degrees. Now he's in a corporate role, but he is not an isolated incident either.

**Katherine:** Sure.

**Maureen:** It's just one of those-- We set people up for success that what we offer and again, the person has to grab it and excel in the role they're at. Hopefully always, we're all talent scouts here. We're all always looking for that next step for a person.

**Katherine:** Absolutely. Maureen, tell me a little bit about some of the partnerships and programs that we have in place at Oatey that maybe we can tell people a little bit about and explain a little bit further.

**Maureen:** Great. Our emphasis over the last few years really has been on building our industrial maintenance technicians. This is a need that we have. We're not the only company that has this need, but we identified that we really needed to build our talent bench with the transitions. Not only at Oatey but in the industry in general. We knew that there was going to be attrition. People are retiring. We got on this four years ago and we've really been successful. This is a state-registered apprentice program, four years.

A combination of classes at the community college as well as mentored on-the-job training. It's been a tremendous success. We are able to mine the talent that's right here.

**Katherine:** Absolutely.

**Maureen:** We are actually right now this week, posting for our fourth cohort.

**Katherine:** Oh, wonderful.

**Maureen:** Again, it's been very successful. I know that the folks that are involved in this, they're feeling that they're progressing. We do promote them throughout that apprentice program. It's been great. We are looking at some other programs as well. We are hoping to launch in the coming weeks, maybe. Keep my fingers crossed, another formal two-year competency-based apprentice program that will address our plastics injection molding operation. We're looking at formalizing a very small ad hoc program that we have in our plastics tooling area.

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**Katherine:** That's wonderful. Brian, for you as the director of operations, how is that for you to be able to have this lineup of talent that is then able to turn over and to be able to support your organization even further?

**Brian:** It's really critical. As Maureen touched on having worked in the manufacturing industry, my whole life it's extremely difficult to find maintenance or mechanical-based talent even more so electrical-based. Having these, especially the industrial maintenance technician apprentice program that we have is number one, self-serving, which is good because we have to develop that talent because it's difficult to find. More than that, it is unbelievably rewarding to be able to offer opportunities like that.

For our own associates who aspire to that to give them an opportunity. They always know that there's somewhere else, some other path I can take. Some other opportunity that I can have if I want to work for it. We've been fortunate enough to have several take that opportunity and for more coming.

**Doug:** That's fantastic. In the trades in my world that I come from, if I want to get into the trades, I'm going to be a plumber, HVAC, electrician, maybe a mechanical guy, I don't think anybody thinks to themselves, "I could be manufacturing and still be in the trades." How do you guys stop that stigma and get those people interested in the manufacturing end of it and still say, "You're still part of the trades."

**Brian:** The good part is we don't have to make them aware of that because the beauty of having these apprenticeship programs is they're already seeing that happening. They're already working in that environment. They know what Oatey does and they see their coworkers who are already industrial maintenance technicians. Maybe because they work side by side with them as an operator, they see what these opportunities look like. It's a really good opportunity where they say, "I want to do that." They know that it's a higher job class position.

They know that that there are rewards that come from the end of it. It self-promotes from within. I'm not sure if I answered the question.

**Doug:** No, actually you did. What about those outside folks that are interested in going into the trades? From an Oatey standpoint, do we reach out to them and we publicize, "Hey, you know what? We're part of a plumbing manufacturing world, and here maybe might be a place you want to get started. Then grow from there maybe into a technical position, and who knows, maybe a business owner someday."

**Maureen:** That is always part of our cell, if you will when we're trying to attract people to come to work in manufacturing because of the fact that we really focus on developing our bench once you're here. As Brian said, we like to let people know that there's a path. If you're ambitious, if you're interested, there's other roles that you can have beyond the job that you start in, in manufacturing. Just to be clear, our emphasis has really always been, or recently has been on the industrial maintenance.

I'd like to say that they're as opposed to being a strict or defined craft, it's really a generalist, that is the role. It's a person that is going to have the training and they're

going to be able to move, do a bit of a spot weld, be able to diagnose an electrical troubleshoot, being able to replace that pump, fix that motor. It's a bit different, I guess not typical when you think traditional trade or craft. We're really focused on building up that real generalist.

**Doug:** It sounds then like you're doing so much cross-training that you're creating a utility person. It's like, "Hey, where do I need you? You're available. We've already trained you in that, and you're ready to go at a drop of a hat."

**Brian:** In a sense, yes. In terms of besides the apprenticeship program, which is from within, we have also been successful attracting external existing maintenance technicians. I believe one of the attractions is exactly as Maureen put it, which is, you're not going to get pigeonholed into working on the same kind of equipment every day. We have a lot of different types of operations inside that plant, a lot of different pieces of equipment that require different skill sets. If you don't have them now, we'll teach them to you, and it makes every day different.

**Doug:** You're paying me to learn?

**Brian:** Exactly. Can't beat debt.

**Katherine:** I know which is a reoccurring comment that we hear a lot where that's, where people who want to use their hands. Don't want to be doing the same thing, don't want to be behind a desk all the time or looking for those opportunities to really do something different. I think the fact that Oatey actually will teach you all these different pieces to be able to have that versatility is really, really quite cool.

**Maureen:** Just to add, we are so committed to that, that we actually pay the person to go to class. Not just the on-the-job training, which obviously they're getting paid for, but unlike some other sponsored apprentice programs, Oatey is paying their class time that's work time. We are that committed to that, and that I believe has been a key feature of why we've been so great at retaining our apprentices. Again, beyond that, just to speak to that, we also have I think three or four people, these were experienced maintenance technicians who are about to be certified in mechatronics down at Cuyahoga Community College.

This is another certification program that's a credential that's recognized across the industry.

**Doug:** I don't know what Mechatronics is, but it sounds like some from the *Transformers*.

**Maureen:** Electronics and mechanics and logic controls and all that good stuff all rolled into one.

**Doug:** Wow. That's really cool.

**Katherine:** I love it. Very, very cool. Obviously, we have everywhere has, even plumbers that we've talked to, and schools that we've talked to, there has been this labor shortage everywhere. Talk to us a little bit about the emphasis on the demand and value of manufacturing workers, as well as how essential they are to society.

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We've talked a lot about this with our plumbers and anyone in the trades right now. There is just that demand that we have got to continue to keep this pipeline going into what we're doing.

Brian, can you talk a little bit about that?

**Brian:** This region of our country was built on manufacturing. It's core to how this region developed. We are an essential business. The products that we make are needed for infrastructure, for something as complex, as a big job, to something you might just do in your house. We saw it over the last two years significantly that people rely on our products to make their own repairs or do some of the things themselves, as opposed to maybe in the past. It's a big sell that when you realize that what you're making, and it's easy to understand.

The other thing about the products that we make, you can see what they are. You can see what they do, and you have seen them in your house. Yes, there's a labor shortage and there still is a lot of competition for the talent that's out there. We have so much going for us in terms of all the things we already talked about with opportunities, plus it's cool, it's fun stuff that we're making. You can relate to it, and it helps. I think it gives us a little bit of an edge if someone's debating back and forth between two opportunities, I like to think that we get the nod on that one.

**Katherine:** I would agree. How about you, Maureen?

**Maureen:** No, I absolutely agree. I know particularly over the last two years, not just Oatey or manufacturing, we've seen a lot of folks either withdraw from the labor market or tentatively reenter in what I call the gig economy. I think that's the term where they can work when they want, no rules, no coworkers, they're working on their own. I don't think that's going to last. In fact, I'm actually starting to see some changes when we interview people, and we're interviewing quite frequently, saying that they want to leave that.

They're tired of the unpredictability. I think we're into an uneasy time in our economy right now. I think having that security, that regularity of a schedule, with an established company in Oatey's 105, 106 years. I do think that we're starting to see a little bit of a trend back.

**Doug:** That's great. Can you explain to us what we do from a manufacturing standpoint that reaches out to the community? What type of organizations, individuals, groups do we reach out to, do we try to bring in, do we try to have conversation with, to educate them on who we are, what we do, and where we'd like to go?

**Maureen:** We reach out to so many people, and because we do a lot of outreach, we get a lot of people reaching out to us. We have ongoing relationships with our area schools, want to give a shout-out to the Planning and Career Education program under Cleveland Metropolitan Schools. Whenever an opportunity to get involved comes my way, I share it, and always we have people in our manufacturing plant and beyond, jump on the opportunity. We have some people that are, for

instance, serving or served because the school year's almost over as mentors in middle schools.

Really talking about what's it like to have a job, really basics. Then beyond that, we've been involved with different activities with Max Hayes High School. It's a local Cleveland public high school that focuses on career and technical education. We've had an occasion we've had some high schoolers in between the summer working, sort of pre-apprentice role. Just learning about manufacturing. Usually, it was under the auspices of a formal intern or high school work program. Other organizations has been Youth Opportunities Unlimited.

We've also obviously reached out to the local colleges, the community colleges, especially because there's more than one way to get your degree.

**Katherine:** That's right.

**Doug:** That's right.

**Maureen:** We've been very successful in reaching out to Lorain County Community College, and as well as Tri-C here. Some great success stories of people that just started off as an operator, and we realized, they're halfway toward their degree in engineering, let's create a role. We did, three years back an engineering technician role. This person is still continuing to get his bachelor's, but he's out there working on projects, helping with capital installs and he's doing really great.

**Katherine:** That's great.

**Doug:** That's fantastic. Wow. I wish I had an apprentice program like this when I was younger. This is great. What other things do we try to do for our employees that make them want to stay at Oatey, make them want to stay as part of the manufacturing company? Obviously, we're offering very competitive pays. We offer health benefits and things of that nature. What else do we do for our employees that you feel is special, that a lot of other places might miss the mark on?

**Brian:** I don't know the list is long-

**Katherine:** Give us some highlight reels. Highlight reels.

**Brian:** I would say the biggest that we touched on it already. I won't repeat it all. The range of opportunities that we give our associates is massive. We also have our corporate office close by our DC distribution center close by. Even if an associate aspires to maybe take a different path, we have something other than the manufacturing plant available to them. That's one. We celebrate diversity in a big way in our plant. We'll have food of a certain ethnicity, eating something different each day for a week. We do a lot of celebrating. Food always works.

**Doug:** Absolutely.

**Brian:** Food always works. It's just an example of how we try to show our appreciation for our associates in a lot of different ways throughout the year. Those are just a couple of examples.

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**Doug:** Those are really good examples, too, because as a business owner in my past, I can tell you that if I just give you a paycheck and send you on your way, anybody can do that. I have witnessed a lot of things. Like, Maureen, you scheduled an ice cream truck last summer, came by.

**Katherine:** Tomorrow if you're still here.

**Doug:** Oh, my God, tomorrow. This is awesome. You order enough.

**Brian:** Do we have any times on that, Maureen?

**Maureen:** I will send you the outlook at night.

**Brian:** Yes. Just little things like that. I've noticed that the manufacturing plant will do that. You guys have had cookouts in the past where every employee, every shift, not just like the day shift. You're talking afternoons and night shifts. Everybody gets to [crosstalk] Did you see across the street, the team of people planting flowers last week and making Did you see across the street? Getting planners for the entrances, trying to show our people that when you walk in the door, it's not just [crosstalk]. It's your second home. In many cases, you're here more than home.

**Katherine:** Right. Absolutely.

**Maureen:** I do want to add too, Brian has a monthly roundtable with a small group of people on every shift. Just another way to make sure the communication is happening, that the information is trickling down as it should. If there's other information out there, that it might be a rumor or is this happening, it's a way for Brian to really stay connected to the people on the floor and get the facts out there.

**Doug:** That's great.

**Katherine:** Yes, that is great. One of the things that I always ask our gas is to talk about, what do they see as their hopes and dreams for the trades? As it comes into as we alluded to trades is also manufacturing, and it's all these different elements. As we see with our current challenges of today, but lots of opportunities here at Oatey, where do you see the future and where do you hope that you'll see the future go?

**Brian:** Well, again, having grown up in the manufacturing industry, a lot of people think it's dead or is dying or don't steer their kids that direction or aren't even interested in it themselves. I think we've proven that and other companies in the area for sure as well, have proven that not to be the case at all. My vision or my hope for the future in manufacturing is that we continue to do a good job in getting that word out, utilize social media. We talked to Maureen and I about creating a video for that to show not just what people are hearing on this podcast but to show them what the inside of our plant looks like.

Word of mouth is fabulous. A lot of our new associates come to us by word of mouth, which says something right there. My hope is that that continues and that we continue to earn that good reputation.

**Katherine:** Yes. How about you, Maureen?

**Maureen:** I would just Echo that. I think for too long, the old stereotypes or visual images of what manufacturing is persisted over the last 30 years or so, really, the 1920s, 1930s, when factories were dangerous places. They were dangerous places. They were loud, they were dirty, inaccessible. You had to walk up several flights of stairs. They had production on multi-levels. You don't see that anymore. Those images, I think, have persisted. That obviously contributed to the much lower interest among high school and young adult ages to go into manufacturing.

The more outreach we do, the more tours we do, the more events like this, we continue to get that word out. A picture really is worth 10000 words. Our manufacturing floor, for instance, it's clean. I'm sure it's safer than your home, and it's certainly safer than the highways that you're driving to and from work.

**Brian:** Amen on that.

**Maureen:** Yes, but this is manufacturing in the 21st century. It's clean. It's climate-controlled.

**Katherine:** Technology too and innovative.

**Maureen:** Sure. We just need to keep pushing that and eventually, those new images will get out there and be persistent.

**Katherine:** Yes, for sure. Is there anything today that you like to close us out with that we didn't cover, that you might want to highlight about Oatey, about the workforce?

**Maureen:** Oatey is a very unique place to work. I've just been blessed to be here for almost eight years. I like to add in just to pick up on what Brian was saying about our diverse plant. It's diverse in terms of our types of products that are made, but it is so diverse in terms of our workforce. I like to say that the world works together. At Oatey Cleveland Manufacturing, we have people from 20 countries, 34 different languages among our folks. You just can't find another place like the Oatey Cleveland plant.

**Katherine:** Well, you said it perfectly well. Thank you both Brian and Maureen for taking your time out of your busy schedules to tell us a little bit more about the opportunities at the Cleveland Manufacturing as well as about the Oatey story. Thank you so much.

**Maureen:** Thank you.

**Brian:** My pleasure.

**Doug:** Thank you.

**Maureen:** Thanks for joining us on this episode of *The Fix*. Be sure to follow us on your favorite podcast platform so you don't miss our next conversation dropping every Wednesday. If you have feedback about the show or a topic you'd like to see

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