

helena.com SUNDAY, JUNE 21, 2009

CEO: Improved communication halted union organizing drive

By CHARLES S. JOHNSON
IR State Bureau

Earlier this decade, some employees of a Billings mining company launched a union organizing campaign, but dropped it after the management improved communications and kept them better informed.

Wyo-Ben Inc. a family-owned business, has its headquarters in Billings and three bentonite mines in Wyoming, said David Brown, president and chief executive officer. It has 100 employees and 40 contractors.

About eight years ago, three employees at its Greybull, Wyo., mine talked to union officials about organizing a union at Wyo-Ben.

"It came back to the workplace, and they talked to other employees," Brown said. "It sparked interest. There were perceptions of some issues with our liming operations, not compensation but fairness issues."

Brown learned of this effort before receiving workers' formal petition for a union.

"I gathered all the employees and asked what's going on," Brown said. "We had never been union and had been in business 52 years then. We're a family company. We have those kinds of family values."

"They unloaded on me. Two days later, we received a petition on the fax machine."

Brown said he started his own campaign to "inform our employees of some of the things they perhaps weren't hearing from the union folks."

More than six weeks before the scheduled secret ballot, employees pulled the plug on the unionization attempt.

"Our employees decided based on information from the union and the company that the union wasn't right for them," Brown said. "We made some changes that were communication-related and keeping employees informed."

A couple of times a year, all Wyo-Ben employees gather for 90-minute, "all-hands" meetings.

"We have a chance to tell them about the financial performances, markets and answer questions," Brown said. "That is a fallout of this process."

"Had we gone union, this would have never occurred. We would have had a union rep standing between employees and management."

If the Employee Free Choice Act had been the law then, Brown said it's likely 50 percent of employees would have signed cards to form a union without a secret ballot election.

"If we eliminate the secret ballot, there would have not been an opportunity for employees to collect the information through their research and figure out what was right for them."

Wyo-Ben Overcomes Union Bid

Clipped By:



seabix1

Thu, Apr 23, 2020