

Creating linemen

By Eric Wolfe

What makes a good lineman? How do you start with ordinary human beings and turn them into people who grab live power lines at great heights for a living?

George Lindsey, who started with PG&E in 1973, remembers how it used to be done.

"I hired on with 8 people. Within a month we all put on tools, we all climbed towers, we all climbed poles, not even having any formal training. Those of us who appeared to do the best we could do, didn't fall, didn't get splinters, didn't get hurt, we went on further." Everybody else, Lindsey says, "went down the road."

Line work has changed a lot since then: bucket trucks, rubber gloves, more safety gear, more rules. As the work changes, so must the training. When PG&E decided a couple of years ago to update its apprentice training, it turned to experienced IBEW linemen like Lindsey to help the company take a new look at the old question: what makes a good lineman?

"A little bit cocky"

"You've got to be pretty attentive, and stay aware of where you're at all the time. And you've got to be a little bit cocky," says Ed Vanderhorst, a 33-year IBEW member and PG&E foreman assisting the company in the training overhaul.

Cocky, confident, whatever you call it, there's a certain attitude that linemen share: they're assertive. And no wonder. They handle a lethal force you can't see or hear or smell. Asserting control over the work environment is a survival skill.

"Sheepish guys, guys who are afraid to speak up, don't seem to be doing line work," Vanderhorst observes.

The PG&E Apprentice Line Worker Initiative—as the program is officially known—figured out early on that is was important to focus on the front end of the process: building a program for pre-apprentices, and identifying good candidates to plug into it.

If you're going to bet on someone being a future lineman, bet on the kid with a mechanical background, says Vanderhorst.

"Go out and look at their dad. If the dad works on his own car, changes his own oil, I want his kid. He's got some manual dexterity, some common sense."

Willie Bouzek, another longtime foreman participating in the training overhaul and a 37-year IBEW member, says you want to look for "the guys who grew up utilizing their hands with proj-

ects around the house." Find people who worked with bicycles, cars, motorcycles, built a tree house and generally learned to do a lot of things with their hands growing up. "They grasp line work pretty quick," Bouzek says.

A fourth IBEW member, Concord Lineman Brett McKinney, has also participated in the PG&E training initiative.

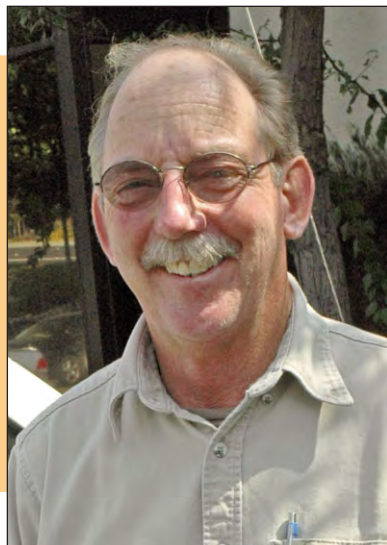
Making a safe lineman

Self-confident people with good mechanical skills have been finding their way to electric utilities for over a century. They've built and maintained an electric grid that provides power to nearly all the people nearly all the time. But a large number of them have died

100% about being a lineman," Bouzek says.

A lineman is someone who knows how to get the job done. The training you get in various classes during your apprenticeship, though a necessary foundation, is just "rudimentary teaching."

"Out in the field, on the jobsite itself, is where the real application begins. When you come back from one of your schools, I'm going to check you out and see what you learned," Bouzek says. "When you demonstrate to me and the other crew members that you have learned the rudimentary tasks, that you have a desire to learn more, then we're going to teach you those skills."



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in the process.

Line work is one of the most dangerous occupations in America. Between 30 and 50 line workers in every 100,000 are killed on the job every year, more than twice the fatality rate of police officers and firemen, according to a 2012 report in *Transmission and Distribution World*. Many more suffer non-fatal loss of limbs and other serious injuries.

The first step in making a good lineman is making a safe lineman. What's the secret? More rigorous work rules? Stiffer punishment for rule breakers?

Experienced foremen like Lindsey, Vanderhorst and Bouzek look in a different direction. Even though they are helping PG&E rethink and redesign work procedures, they say the key to safety resides mostly within the workers themselves.

When an apprentice comes onto Bouzek's crew, he learns that the job is more than just the work methods, more than the tools, more than the rules. It's a state of mind.

"It's all about being a lineman, it's

have taught you what we know, the next time we get to a spot where we need the skill set we taught you, you're responsible for knowing it."

Learning from your mistakes is an important part of apprenticeship. But when you're working with electricity, mistakes can get people killed. Linemen are not shy when it comes to chewing out apprentices for making mistakes, especially when safety is involved. Colorful language can help drive the lesson home.

It can also get you into trouble. Apprentices today are quicker to go upstairs with complaints about verbal harassment. Journeymen worry about losing a time-honored teaching tool—a good tongue-lashing.

"You have to talk nice to 'em," says Vanderhorst. "You can't cuss at 'em. You have to speak softly, don't yell at 'em."

Journeymen—and the union—have pushed back, arguing that higher-ups shouldn't micromanage how journeymen get their point across in the field. PG&E has listened.

Management is beginning to understand that sweet talk isn't always the

Handing it down

You can learn the basics from classes, but you learn how to do the job from those who already do it. The craft resides with the linemen. And part of being a lineman is handing down what you know to the next generation.

According to Vanderhorst, passing on your knowledge is something "bred into" linemen. "The guys take you under their wing and teach you stuff. It's just part of the craft, sharing what you know."

"Here's what happens on a crew," says Bouzek. "We will take the time to teach you once, we will teach you twice, we will teach you three times. But once we have taught you the craft, once we

answer, says Vanderhorst, "so you can start being a little rough around the edges now."

Those rough edges serve a higher purpose.

"I've never really cared immediately whether someone liked me or not, but I cared if they went home alive," says Lindsey. "If you went home with all your fingers and toes and you still had the ability to see, talk, comb your hair, and you hated my guts, it was OK."

The heart of the craft

There's a good reason that journeymen want to protect their authority to run the job as they see fit. There is no single set of rules that can foresee every

Template for other crafts

Safety concerns don't end with line work, and neither does PG&E's training initiative. The program's charter specifies that the program will be designed in such a way that it can serve "as the template for all other apprenticeships within PG&E."



“You can’t be afraid of offending somebody if there are lives at stake.”

Ed Vanderhorst, foreman

possible hazard or describe the exact procedure that should be used on every job. The heart of the journeyman’s craft is knowing the reasons behind the rules and being able to incorporate that knowledge into everyday practice.

“If you follow rules to follow the rules, you’re an idiot,” says Lindsey. You follow rules because you understand what they’re providing. “I ground the 12 to provide a barrier in case something happens. It’s a must. It’s not about a rule. It’s a practice,” he says.

To these linemen, it sometimes has seemed that PG&E is trying to bottle up all the rules needed to do line work, to be a lineman, and then trying to squeeze all those rules into work procedures. One reason these union men have devoted so much time to PG&E’s Apprentice Line Worker Initiative is to help the company understand that rules can only take you so far. At some point, how you execute the job will come down to the journeyman’s experience and judgment.

Don’t get the idea these journeymen are against rules or the classroom instruction where rules are taught. PG&E’s program will include a full year of pre-apprenticeship and four years as an apprentice lineman, “with a dramatic increase in classroom instruction,” says Bouzek approvingly.

“We detoured away from classroom instruction because of the cost component in years past, and that had a major impact on our knowledge and skill sets in the field.” Adequate classroom training, Bouzek believes, ensures that apprentices can focus on acquiring cer-

tain skills without the distractions that invariably happen on the job.

But even as they assist the company in creating appropriate procedures and rules for getting the job done, these linemen believe that rules and procedures will never define what a lineman is, let alone be able to create one.

The vehicle metaphor

In fact, too much emphasis on rules and procedures could be counter-productive.

Lindsey explains with a metaphor. Think of everything outside of the lineman as a vehicle—all the rules, procedures, tools, and safety gear. The company puts a great deal of energy into making that vehicle safe.

“We put a liner in that bucket truck, we test that liner, those are vehicles. We test the fiber glass integrity of the bucket—that’s a vehicle,” Lindsey says. In earlier times, he believes, there was more focus on the “driver,” the person who does the work, rather than focusing on all the external factors, the “vehicle.”

“We were drivers of any vehicle. We didn’t necessarily need the perfect brakes, the perfect steering wheel, the perfect transmission,” Lindsey says, extending his metaphor, “because we were drivers. We were taught how to do the work in a manner that was a safe manner. We were taught techniques, the way you go about what you do.”

In short, they were taught a craft, how to be a craftsman.

“Because of all the inherent dangers there, we were more exposed to risks,

yet because of that we became better drivers.” Today’s linemen, Lindsey speculates, can only be “as good a driver as the vehicle allows them to be. If you press the auto button and the vehicle drives itself you’re never really going to learn how to drive the vehicle.”

Preservation of the craft

Every lineman, says Bouzek, reaches a point where “there’s not a set of rules that describe where you’re at,” and the lineman must utilize his experience from past jobs to get to the core of the matter, to assess the hazards and make a determination on how to proceed.

Most managers, he says, do not have the experience or the skills to make that determination. If anyone attempts to override a foreman’s assessment of the hazards, say Bouzek, “you stand your ground and say, ‘I’m not going to do that work, it’s not safe, I’m not going to do that. I’m not going to let my men do anything along those lines until it’s 100% safe.’”

“You can’t be afraid of offending somebody if there are lives at stake,” agrees Vanderhorst.

Vanderhorst believes the presence of union craftsmen in PG&E’s Apprentice Line Worker Initiative will ultimately lead to a better result, better linemen.

“The union had a lot of say-so in this. We’re representing the union,” he says.

Along with Bouzek and Lindsey, Vanderhorst hopes their efforts will lead to better linemen, safer linemen, and the preservation of a craft that has served the public for more than a century.

Emphasis on safety

Local 1245 is putting new emphasis on line safety with its peer-to-peer program known as “Hold the Pull,” which seeks to reinforce safety awareness among linemen and apprentices.

The Hold the Pull committee has been visiting apprentice lineworker classes at PG&E’s Livermore training center since January 2012. The training school has set aside a 2-hour slot in which apprentices learn about the HTP initiative and participate in discussions ranging from how to identify good crew mentors, understanding the importance of speaking up for safety, and developing a strong safety attitude. The HTP committee members use life experiences as linemen and union brothers to explain the importance of safety and job excellence.



Local 1245 has created the post of Safety Steward to help the union monitor safety in the workplace and respond to safety concerns that arise. There are currently 31 Safety Stewards associated with the Hold the Pull program.

Due to an increase in committee activities the HTP committee is expanding to 10 members, up from six members in 2012. The two most recent additions are Casey Kelley, line foreman with Liberty Utilities West and Greg Dydo of NV Energy.

HTP will embark on a tour of unit meetings throughout the year that will take committee members from Redding to the Bay Area to Bakersfield. Among the units visited in 2012 were Placerville, Woodland and SMUD. The HTP committee requests that safety stewards attend unit meetings in support of the peer to peer effort when the committee is in your area.

For more information on Safety Stewards or the union’s peer-to-peer safety initiatives, please contact Business Rep. Rich Lane at RVL5@ibew1245.com.

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