Making Safety Work

Everybody Believes in Safety, But How Do You Really Make It Happen?

A philosophy of safety is a bit like a philosophy of life. Everybody has one, at least in the broad general outlines. But putting it into practice in terms of the specific details that make it really work is something else.

Here are a couple of wall and ceiling contractors with relatively new programs, who have struggled with this issue and come up with some practical measures that really work.

"As little as a year ago, we were way off base on what to do about safety," says Steve Yeager, president, Circle B Company, Indianapolis, Ind. "We had a great written safety program, a wealth of safety equipment, and a safety director," he says. "But we also had an experience modification rating of 1.06, a field disconnected from the office and a view of safety as a necessary evil and a cost impediment to productivity."

Yeager’s solution was to bring in an outside expert Sheryl Wiser, whose Safety Management Group is also based in Indianapolis. The report Wiser brought back, Yeager says, "showed that our field workers didn’t believe in our safety program, our operations people didn’t believe in it, and that we were, by and large, applying a written program that was not supported by management, where responsibility was not defined and accountability was lacking or even totally avoided."

The routine of safety programs is similar to most, including initial training given to new hires first in the office, then in the field; weekly tool box, job-specific, safety talks; monthly safety committee meetings and a portion of every weekly management meeting devoted to safety.

But the main dynamics, Yeager says, involved a shift from process to people.” Yeager was told that change had to start at the top, and he was required to give a pint of blood and make a full commitment to the process. The safety director and some of the operations and other personnel were changed.

Put into place was a system of incentives and guidelines. On a quarterly basis, every employee with a perfect safety record is given a $50 gift certificate to a local sporting goods or grocery store, and the foreman, in addition, can get a bonus, up to 30 percent of which is related to safety.

The real teeth in the program, however, come from the accountability practices. If a worker engages in an unsafe practice, he is given a verbal warning by his foreman or peers. If he persists, he receives an incident report. Three incident reports, and he is terminated.

But foremen and peers are also held accountable too, the foremen primarily, and the tradesmen secondarily, says Safety Administrator Sheryl Yarascheski. They can be cited for negligence following an accident, an
OSHA inspection or unannounced inspection from outside consultants.

Yeager, a union contractor, found that what turned out to be “tremendously successful was to establish a craft tradesmen safety committee. This got the workers involved in the process.

“They finally understood that we were more concerned about them than our insurance rating” Yeager says. “This has been our main theme, that we care about you, your ability to be productive and take a respectable paycheck home, which you can’t do if you are injured.”

Circle B’s safety success, Yeager says, “came through our making a major cultural change. Controller Scott Kline reports that in six months recordable accidents dropped from 26 to 15, on a payroll of 160 people, and the EMR rating went from 1.06 to 0.84. But the real dynamics came in the change in attitude from safety as a cost or drag on productivity, to being a primary and integral aspect of productivity

“There have been wonderful side benefits to the program,” Yeager says. “It’s permeated everybody’s attitude. People know management cares about them, and they care about each other. The result is improved communication and productivity across the board.”

Incentives Work

Change of attitude was also the key driver for safety improvement at MKB Construction Inc., Phoenix. A worker’s fill from a scaffold resulting in a serious injury was what galvanized President Mike Boyd to bring in expertise from the outside to implement a safety program. He hired as safety director John Dusch, who had a background in safety for a cement company and the Coast Guard.

Hired in August 1998, Dusch says, “The key is the middle management foremen and supervisors, for they spend the biggest amounts of time with the men working in the field, and they have to be made to realize how important they are.”

Dusch says it was a big job, and it took about six months before he began to see a big turnaround. “These guys have been in the field for so long, they think they don’t need this or that, and injuries are a part of doing business.” One of Dusch’s
tasks was to show them that they didn’t have any choice about it. Ultimately, it took only a single reprimand, done in private—but word got around quickly.

With 40 jobs going on at any one time, the challenge was to establish a sense of consistency so that safety procedures proceeded from one job to the next, and are an integral part of each job. Dusch likens his job to that of a football coach, to create a team effort regarding safety, and to constantly drill the message, breaking it down to simple tasks that the personnel can incorporate into their daily routines.

For every 500 accident- and injury-free hours, a worker gets a sticker for his hard hat. When he receives five stickers, he is given a company hard hat. Dusch believes it is as important to give recognition for what employees do right in terms of safety, and not just for what they do wrong. He is not a believer in monetary incentives, however.

“The programs I’ve seen that work with monetary incentives work for all the wrong reasons,” he says. “People want to win a prize. But we want to change attitudes.”

Though the company has tool box talks and management leadership training, a variation is after-work classes in topics such as CPR and first aid, lift certification and driver’s training, as well as welding and blueprint reading, with safety features built. The classes are entirely volunteer, but are recognized by management as stepping stones up the company ladder. Consequently, there’s a waiting line of employees who want to take the courses. MKB’s accident incident rate dropped from 67 in 1998 to 49 in 1999.

“There’s been a much more positive attitude, and this hasn’t hurt productivity,” Dusch says. “In fact the result has been a raising both the level and quality of productivity. Workers who take pride in their safety take pride in their work.”

**Accident Investigation**

Obviously, nobody wants accidents to happen, and this is the purpose of safety programs. But construction sites are dangerous, and accidents do happen. When they do, it’s important to have
good investigation procedures in place. One good reason for this is, quite simply, accident prevention, to make sure a similar accident doesn’t happen again.

Richard Ziebell, product development manager for the Neenah, Wis.-based J.J. Keller, Inc., which produces accident investigation kits, reports that for every serious accident, there are 10 minor injuries, 30 incidents of property damage, and 600 near misses.

Actually the near misses provide the most fruitful form of investigation, for they can lead to the prevention of an actual accident. Near misses as well as dangerous situations should be written up and reviewed by middle and top management, with recommendations for change and means of implementing these changes with the same seriousness as are actual accidents. Again, it’s the commitment from the top that will lead to an actual prevention of an accident, as opposed to a mere, “Whew, that was a close one!”

In terms of accident investigation preparation, Ziebell recommends having a kit that will include such items as a camera with live film, yellow barricade tape, a flashlight with batteries, graph paper and pencils for quick sketches, warning signs, tape measures, rubber gloves, sample containers with labels, plus witness statement forms along with sample interview questions.

The companies that do the most effective investigations usually have more than one investigator. Usually the jobsite foreman or superintendent is the key person. But personnel from the safety committee or even different departments can also do their own investigation, with a third party in upper management to review both reports, then explore further if there are discrepancies.

There are three sets of people to be interviewed after an accident: the victim, eyewitnesses, and co-workers or even friends or family who may not have been on the site but who can provide an insight into the victim’s state of mind at the time prior to the accident.

Ziebell says witnesses should be asked open-ended as opposed to suggestive or leading questions. “Don’t ask if you saw oil on the ground, for the oil may or may not have been a hazard in that situation or a cause of that particular accident. Ask instead if you saw anything unusual.”

And a good investigator should not be quick to blame the employee. All too often accident reports place the cause on “employee carelessness.” But the employee may not be to blame at all.

To determine what really happened, it is important to distinguish between immediate and root causes.

Immediate causes are those conditions that are obviously related to an accident, but are not necessarily the reason the accident occurred. By looking no further than the immediate cause, it is easy to lay the blame for many accidents on employees. However, deficiencies in company policy and procedure, faulty or poorly designed equipment or lapses in company training programs are often at the root of accidents. Though accident investigation will uncover such underlying causes, you need to report everything in order for change to occur.

Immediate causes, then, make the accidents happen.

Root causes are the underlying conditions that make the immediate causes possible. When you identify the root cause, you can make changes to prevent the occurrence of the immediate causes.

Here’s a concrete example provided by the course materials of “Accident Investigation In The Workplace,” provided by J.J. Keller, Inc.:

“A painter is working from the 20-foot top section of a 40-foot extension ladder, using it as a single ladder. He is standing on the fourth rung from the top. While reaching out to make the last few strokes with his brush, he loses his balance and falls 10 feet, landing on a stack of boxes—product temporarily left there to be shelved elsewhere.”

The boldface statements below indicate
85 percent of accidents involve the human factor of behavior. Joseph Kinney, president of National Safe Workplace Institute, Charlotte, N.C.

“If you have a serious accident and don’t bring in an outside investigator, you’re being foolish,” Kinney says, “because there will be an investigation by OSHA, and there can be a lawsuit.” OSHA investigations are not admissible in court, Kinney adds. Nor are the police required to release their reports.

“We know that 85 percent of accidents involve the human factor of behavior,” Kinney says, explaining that this further points out the need for an expert objective investigator. Cost should not be a consideration in a situation like this, for, as he says, insurance studies reveal that a serious accident in which four or more people are injured will cost at least $100,000, a typical lawsuit will start at $1 million, while a good investigator will cost less than $10,000.

But, if you go to an outside investigator, aren’t you giving away control, and so increasing your liability?

Kinney’s says there are ways to minimize liability. The first thing to do is have the investigator’s report delivered to your lawyer. This ensures confidentiality. It may prevent or delay an OSHA citation. Don’t talk to the press until the facts are in. If equipment is involved in the accident, document this by writing the manufacturer. The outside investigation also can provide objective evidence that may help you in court—a good internal investigation can easily be perceived as self-serving.

Once a good investigation is completed, it is critical that the top executives debrief the employees. “Management has to regain the confidence of employees, to show that they really care,” Kinney says. “Employees need to know what happened, as well as the measures the company has taken to make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

The same candor should extend to the courtroom, Kinney says. “This is where defense lawyers often go astray,” he explains. “These lawyers are concerned about the law, but juries usually take a common sense approach. If the company did an internal investigation, especially a sloppy one, or none at all, the plaintiff’s lawyer will make it appear that the company doesn’t care about its employees.”

But what if the outside investigation shows that the company really was at fault?

Here too, Kinney’s position is that the truth is going to come out sooner or later, so you’ll have a better chance of winning a jury’s sympathy and minimizing damages by coming out and admitting it.

“Juries respond to a company who will say something along the lines of, ‘We were under pressure, did too much overtime and just screwed up,’” Kinney maintains. He adds that he can provide names of good investigators in your area.