What do you do if you’ve done everything right, but you still haven’t come up with a safety program that really works?

Yes, there is a commitment from upper management, which is willing to be not only a booster for safety, but also put its money where its mouth is by buying the latest and greatest in fall equipment, and, in fact, do whatever the safety director may ask. And, yes, you have a safety director, safety committees, safety talks, toolbox talks in the field, policies and procedures, pamphlets, signs and monetary incentives too. Yet still, there are accidents.

After an accident, you may see some big improve-
ments for a short time, and maybe even some overall improvements. But you’re still not where you’d like to be. Workers’ compensation rates are still killing you.

The reasons, though we don’t like to admit it, are obvious. Safety, as a topic, is boring. And most people, as they go through their daily lives, have other things to think about. When’s the last time one of us sought out one of the many publications the government churns out on driving defensively or safety in the home? Moreover, if we’ve heard it once, we have heard it a hundred times.

So is it really all that surprising that workers tend to regard their toolbox talks as minor irritations resulting from their bosses’ trying to meet an OSHA requirement? And is it really surprising that, human nature being what it is, that even generally safety-conscious people will sometimes make mistakes—and accidents will happen? After all, construction is a dangerous business.

So, what do you have to do?

**Communication Conundrum**

Daniel Karpelenia, safety director for KHS&S Contractors, with corporate headquarters in Tampa, Fla., found the type of situation mentioned above when he first came to the company about six years ago. KHS&S is a nationwide contracting company with annual sales revenues of more than $200 million and some 2,500 employees. Being a large company, KHS&S also knew it had the potential for large liability and wanted to do everything it could to bring this liability under control.

“There appeared to be a good safety program,” Karpelenia recalls. “But it just didn’t jell.”

“Nothing seemed to sink in,” he says. “The new employees we screened didn’t seem to hear what we were telling them. We had tool box talks, safety meetings, but accidents were happening on a more frequent basis, and there were many little things that made clear to us that we just weren’t communicating. Our attitude began to change from ‘why don’t they listen to what we tell them’ to ‘why don’t we talk to them in a way that will make them want to listen?’”

The key dynamic for change, Karpelenia says, was the formation of a safety committee. Now, as we all may know, a safety committee is hardly unusual. Nor is it unusual that most aren’t all that effective; well, neither was the one at KHS&S . . . at least in the beginning.

The grandest vision can be derailed by the smallest irksome
detail. In this case, it was finding the right time for committee members to meet. For the folks at KHS&S, it wasn’t a matter of the committee members meeting on their own time—they met during working hours, and were paid for their time, including overtime if they stayed a little later. But the project never really got off the ground because too many members just wouldn’t come to the meetings. Moreover, these meetings were scheduled for only once a month, lasting for about an hour—hardly, it would seem, a burdensome demand. But employees obviously felt it was a burden.

“At first we tried to have the meetings at 7 a.m. in the company office. But by the time people drove over, got their tools and drove to the jobsite, it was about 9 a.m. A day of production was shot. We then tried it at 3 o’clock, but that’s after everybody had done about a full day’s work. They were tired and wanted to go home.”
Visibility is crucial, so an identity was created for members of the company’s safety committee.

Finally, Karpelenia set the meeting for 2 p.m. “This seemed to work better,” he says. People had gone to work, had their lunch, and it seemed part of their normal work day. Also, they knew they would go home at their regular time. “So attendance improved, attention span increased and people got motivated for safety,” Karpelenia says.

Spicing It Up

At the same time, Karpelenia was striving to do everything he could to make the meetings interesting; including bringing in guest speakers. He also determined that visibility was crucial,
so meetings were held on jobsites and an identity was created for safety committee members.

“Normally, workers wouldn’t know who the committee members were. But we voted to all wear green hard hats, green being the universal symbol of safety,” Karpelenia explains. “The general contractor, the other subcontractors and our employees see us, and all know that we have a high awareness of safety. We think it’s effective. And it gives the safety committee a sense of the importance the company attaches to it.”

Jobsite inspections were also initiated. Karpelenia says the inspections gave relevance to the committee by resulting in recommendations and changes that could immediately impact a job in progress.

Another breakthrough came with the intensification of safety training for new employees. The initial session
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Karpelenia says he knows the incentives help, for he often hears workers asking if their names were drawn. But he considers the incentives only part of the larger program, and not an end it itself.

Practicing What They Preach

Safety committees, like just about every other committee, first formed to solve a problem, tend to become self-perpetuating bureaucracies. For this reason, members serve on the KHS&S Safety Committee for only eight months. This keeps fresh blood coming in and takes away stagnancy.

What the company has learned by going through this experience, Karpelenia says,

In terms of incentives, Kupelenia says, “People think you have to have a great big complicated program, but ours is very simple. Each year we set aside $12,000 for incentives. The names of employees who have no accidents or citations automatically go into a hat from which the winners are drawn, in a number of categories, the prizes usually ranging from $50 to $300 each.”

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In today’s competitive market, safety is an economic necessity. is, “If the people in the field don’t understand why we want them to work safely, because of human nature, they probably won’t do what we ask. You can’t go out and demand. A lot of people have the attitude that a safety program involves some kind of police work. But you can’t demand people’s respect. You have to earn it. If you go out there and earn people’s respect, then they’ll listen.”

Safety sounds like a simple subject, Karpelenia says, but actually it consists of many subjects: injury reporting, protective equipment, housekeeping, fire protection, first aid, electrical safety,
hazcom, substance abuse prevention, respiratory protection, fall protection, ergonomics, stairway safety and scaffold safety. On and on. It all has to be taught in an effective way so that employees actually learn the principles and implement them.

“Everybody has a different philosophy, so you can’t just create an ideal structure and then put it on paper,” Karpelenia says. “You need to look at the real factors going on in your workplace and make them work.”

In today’s competitive environment, safety is an economic necessity, Karpelenia says. In 1998, the company’s experience modification rate was 0.77. In both 1999 and 2000 it was 0.72. KHS&S’s 2001 rate is 0.57—which, according to Karpelenia, is almost unheard of in such a large company. “Our goal is to continue to reduce it,” Karpelenia says. “It won’t be easy, but we think we can do it if we work together.”

But Karpelenia, who will also lead the AWCI Safety Directors Forum next month (held in conjunction with AWCI’s annual convention), adds that economics is not the most important reason for a good safety program. “We’ve assumed that it is our responsibility to provide a safe work environment,” Karpelenia says. “Our workers have the right to go home every day without an injury.”