OCP Plays It Safe

There Is No Conflict Between Safety and Productivity at OCP Contractors

"There is a myth, I call it a construction myth, that says safety slows down production," says Matt Taylor, safety director of the Holland, Ohio-based OCP Contractors, winner of AWCI's 2002 Excellence in Construction Safety Award. "But, in fact, good safety practices can speed up production."

Nevertheless, both Taylor and OCP President Matt Townsend acknowledge that this was a formidable myth to contend with. But before seeing how they did it, let's first take a quick look at the results. The current safety program began with the arrival of Taylor as full-time safety director in 1999. In that first year there were 27 accidents. Last year there was 15. The company's Experience Modification Rate dropped from .60 to .57 last year, and it's down to .55 this year. Nine men were on restricted hours in 1999, as contrasted to three men last year, which also saw zero disabling injuries in 528,634 man-hours.

OCP specializes in many fields, including exterior insulation and finish systems, drywall, fireproofing, wall covering, insulation, exterior stucco, plastering, steel framing and access flooring systems. Some key projects include the student union building at Bowling Green State University and the 150,000-square-foot Kingston Residence.

Safety doesn't come without a cost, but there's a real return on investment. Taylor's salary, new safety equipment, and related costs amounted to about $100,000, but the company estimates that a lower EMR rate and lower accident numbers result in an estimated savings of about $220,000 per year.

The Association of the Wall and Ceiling Industries—International is not the only organization that has recognized OCP's safety efforts. "This is the second year we've been nominated for the Ohio Governor's Excellence Award, competing against general industry and construction which includes 280,000 employers statewide," Taylor says. "After receiving..."
nominations in previous years we were especially gratified to be one of only six employers chosen to receive this prestigious award in 2002.”

**Go with a Pro**

How did the company get from there to here in only a few short years?

“Previously we had a retired carpenter as safety director,” Townsend recalls. “He got us started in the right direction, but he sometimes had blinders on because he didn’t want to slow production. We knew we needed a professional.”

Bringing in a trained outsider was an important dynamic to the program’s success. But both Townsend and Taylor acknowledge that there was initially considerable resistance from the workers. “In a lot of situations, the tendency is to grab somebody from the crew and make him the safety person,” says Taylor, who is a Construction Health and Safety Technician. “One of my biggest challenges was showing that I knew what I was talking about, that I had the education and this was my professional field. The guys really don’t want to hear about it from somebody who doesn’t know any more about it than they already know.”

The only way a safety program can work, says Taylor, “is if the owner not only talks safety, but proves it, day in and day out. One key way the owner does this is to give the safety director real authority” Townsend agrees: “We had to establish credibility, so at the quarterly open forum attended by all the foreman, I announced that Matt Taylor had top authority on the job, so there was no second guessing.”

This meant that Taylor had the power to stop a job, which, in fact, he once did. The electrical contractor was running temporary wiring over the ground where there were a lot of puddles. Taylor asked them to be removed. He was told he had to go through the general contractor, so Taylor asked him. Two hours later, when nothing had been done, Taylor took his five men off the job. “There was a lot of
One of the main factors Taylor had to bring to the safety program, he says, “is consistency. A lot of people came from the old school, who were used to doing it this way or that way, but maybe not the right way. So we enforced a consistent no-nonsense program. For every safety infraction, you get a write-up. With three write-ups, you take three to four days off. Four write-ups and you’re gone.” Taylor reports that it took about eight months before people accepted, as he says, “that if you test the no-nonsense program, you lose.” A number of people got up to two write-ups, but nobody ventured for the third.

It’s a Tough Job

“I found out nobody likes the safety director,” Taylor says. “It’s a hard role to play. But at the end of the day, if the employees go home unharmed, it’s one of
those deals where they might not like you, but their kids do.”

Yet, though Taylor finds it necessary to be consistent and firm, he also adds that it’s equally important simply to not create unnecessary harassment. The written policy is not that important, Taylor says. “OSHA has enough polices,” he explains. “There’s no point in having a policy if you don’t enforce it.” So, he’s selective. He does enforce the wearing of hard hats, which was a challenge in the beginning. But safety glasses are required only when needed. “If you show the guys you’re not going to put undue stress on them in an area where they don’t really need safety glasses, they’ll tend to work with you where it is important.” Taylor found the workers liked a certain type of “designer” glasses that made them look better and feel more comfortable. The new glasses got people wearing safety glasses more often without having to be reminded.

Taylor makes it a point to work with the employees, rather than impose on them.
“You can’t come in with an iron fist, especially with fall protection,” he says. “I tell them, I’m not here to tell you how to build it. But you tell me how you can do your job and still be tied off, and I’ll work with what you want.’ That’s what makes this successful. If they want, we’ll buy special equipment. They wanted $1,200 horizontal life lines, so we got them, no questions asked.”

Taylor also believes in example rather than force wherever possible. He noted that of the 23 accidents in 2000, more than half were hand cuts resulting from handling oily light gauge framing. He got three men to voluntarily wear the Kevlar protective gloves as an experiment for the week. “Once the others saw these three wearing them, they asked for them too,” Taylor says. “I’ve found that if you let guys try things out on their own, they tend to do the right things.”

What also aids acceptance, Taylor says, is demonstrating that the company really does care about its employees. Built into the program is light duty for an injured worker, which, he says, “gives the guys a sense of security, that you’re not going to abandon him when he’s hurt, that he can keep working and keep getting paid,” Taylor says.

It’s a win-win policy, he adds. By keeping employees working, the company keeps its workers’ compensation premiums down. Also, because the worker has a sense of security, Taylor says, “he knows he is still putting food on the table. He has a better attitude toward the company and his production.”

Along these same lines, the company has quarterly meetings with the state bureau of workers’ comp, along with Corvel, the MCO and the ASU Group, OCP’s third-party administrator. “But we make sure that the guys are taken care of medically and financially, so they’re not lost in the paper work and aren’t able to pay their bills and have to deal with collection agencies.” The benefit, Taylor says, is two-fold. The workers get the medical attention they need, and because they are taken care of, they have a much better attitude. “They ask to get off of restricted hours and back to regular work by making simple job changes in the field” Taylor says.
On the other hand, neither Taylor nor Townsend believe much in incentive safety programs. Incentives for sales is one thing, but for safety is something else. “When you have incentives for safety, people tend to hide things, or not speak out,” Townsend says. “You should be motivated for safety, for that, in itself, is its own award. The company does add up points for being safe, for not being written up or cited by OSHA, which allows workers to get catalog items such
as coats and jackets. But this, Townsend says, “is more an expression of our appreciation. We don’t expect anybody to be motivated to be safe because of things like that.”

The company’s drug program, Taylor says, “was a big road to cross, and we thought we were going to lose a lot of employees.” Coming together about the same time were the union’s program for drug testing of apprentices as well as random testing of others, and our company’s post-accident testing. This turned out, however, not to be an issue. “We were told that the statistics had shown that more than 10 percent of the force had drug issues, but we found less than 1 percent, and we didn’t lose anybody over the testing.” The company’s intent is to rehabilitate an employee who tests positive for drugs, as opposed to simply passing him off to another company where he might pose a safety threat.

Trained for Safety

Training is important to the program. All of OCP’s 36 supervisors and managers have completed 10 or 30 hours of OSHA’s construction outreach program within the past three years, and all have attended a competent person training program. Taylor elicits cooperation from employees by having training on a specific topic once a month, dur-
ing lunch hour, for which the company buys the lunch.

In terms of safety versus productivity, Taylor says, “Now that we’ve gone through 11 OSHA inspections without a citation, the foremen are beginning to see how much time has been saved.”

“Look at it this way,” Taylor continues. “Say a guy gets hurt on the job. In addition to his lost productivity, there are about 10 people standing around asking if he is OK while waiting for the ambulance. Then there’s somebody who sits by his side as he’s taken to the hospital. Then there’s the loss of production while everybody talks about what happened for two days, not only on that site, but all the jobs you are running; word gets around. On top of that there’s my time spent in investigating it, and, of course, OSHA will be involved. That’s a lot of lost production.”

Says Townsend, who has seen both the before and after, “Maybe when you introduce a new protective device, there’s a slight slowdown for the learning curve, but once the guys understand how it works, production picks right back up. Overall, there’s no noticeable decrease in production. It’s the other way around, really.

“There was definitely resistance in the early days, but now there is no resistance, and morale is up. OCP is a better place to work, and that increases productivity not only on the jobs we have, but also in getting new ones. Most general contractors require data on our safety program and EMR rates as part of the pre-bid subcontractor qualifications. We believe our safety record provides a competitive advantage and would prefer that all significantly sized projects required safety record reporting prior to bid awards. We’ve started to actively use our safety record as a sales tool and believe that safety’s importance within the industry is growing. Our willingness to invest in safety is based upon the premise that owners will ultimately reduce building risk as well as potential liabilities by hiring contractors who are not only experienced and skilled but safe.”