“Safety is as safety does,” goes the slogan (is that from Forrest Gump?) but what does one do to promote safety as a smaller company without the luxury of a big budget and single-hatted director of safety? We asked a dozen smaller contractors how they dealt with safety issues and found that while working safely might get old after a while, it was also recognized that so did those who practiced it.

“Safety’s fine if you got the time” is not an approach that works, and none of the contractors canvassed had this point of view—they were all serious about the need to keep safety front and center. Safety does begin with the worker, as we often hear (“Put safety in your head when you get out of bed” is anoth-
er useful slogan), but contractors know they also need to remind employees of safety, even if it is information the employees essentially already know.

What’s It to You?

One contractor from Colorado says, “My last employee started as an apprentice 12 years ago, so they all have a lot of common sense and do not need to be told a lot about safety. They are grown men and don’t need to have their hands held. They know I expect the best from them, and that’s what I get. In the 1950s and 1960s people did things right, and we all learned our technique and work ethic from good role models. This approach is possible in a small organization, but for a large one, accountability falls by the wayside when people point fingers. In a small organization, there are not enough people to point to. If you have responsible people, this approach is fine.”

An Arizonian agrees on the common sense angle: “The challenge is getting people to use common sense, as most
accidents that happen seem to be a violation of common sense—not paying attention.”

“This is not to say we don’t have accidents,” continues the Colorado man, because common sense can be overridden by plain bloody-mindedness: “Six years ago, I told an employee not to put a ladder on top of a piece of scaffolding and then climb to the top of the ladder and try to do an operation. He did exactly that as soon as I left the site, and the dynamics of the situation resulted in the scaffold tipping over and him falling and breaking his ankle. I had told him not to do this based on common sense and my own experience, as I had done the same thing in earlier years and fallen quite far, luckily without hurting myself too badly (lending credence to the saying “ladder safety has its ups and downs.”).

“But drywallers are stubborn and don’t like to be told what to do—I know that for a fact because I am one. His attitude was, ‘What does he know?’ He was embarrassed, of course, and it turned out to be a worker’s comp claim, but he only received 50 percent because he admitted he had disobeyed my instructions. When another employee did the exact same thing after I had warned him, I got plenty mad, because not only he was hurt, but the whole crew packed up and left for the day when we were trying to get a job done.

“But overall, my guys are safety conscious, from wearing goggles to alternating jobs in order to use different muscles and avoid repetitive motion injuries. To avoid hanging wallboard overhead all day, which can wreak havoc with the body, I invested in a chain-driven battery-powered panel lift, so
they don’t have to use their shoulders. It definitely saves the strain on a guy’s back, shoulder and neck when trying to push board against a floor joist and hold it there long enough to drive in some tacks.

“Our program is a combination of increasing awareness of what is on the market to prevent injuries, and having a good background in safety. I read all the trade magazines, go to conventions every other year, and talk with people from other market areas, as certain things are emphasized in different market areas. We also work on larger projects where we are required to have weekly safety meetings, to be harnessed, etc., and ensure we are OSHA compliant.

“The biggest challenge with regard to safety, however, is other trades. There has been a degradation of conditions on job sites of late, with general contractors allowing schedules to slide and too many trades to work on a job at the same time, getting in each other’s way. The added clutter and noise is distracting and affects quality and morale adversely. When a saw is screaming in your ear, it is hard to pay attention to what you are doing. If you are using a utility knife or power equipment, you can injure yourself, or you may end up breathing the dust or lacquer fumes from other trades.

“They should post notices and let people know ahead of time that the painters will be spraying lacquer on Tuesday, so that those who have respiratory problems or are affected by the fumes do not come to work on that day, and are not be penalized by investing time driving to and from a job site and not having anything else scheduled for that
day. I’ve had one guy tell me, ‘Oh, you are drywall, you are supposed to be dead by the time you are 50.’ That day, we left the site because they were grinding concrete and the whole place was full of talc, getting in our lungs and eyes and creating a poor environment for our products. I can deal with the materials in my own trade because I know what risks I am facing and can take the appropriate precautions, but I can’t do that for the byproducts of other trades so well.

“The problem is really GCs cramming through projects and not putting enough competent superintendents on job sites, so there is a weak chain of command, and guys are learning in the field instead of knowing how to schedule and run a job. They are letting the subs hammer out schedules. The problem snowballed downhill during the late 1980s and the 1990s to the point where schedules are out of whack at every job I go to. Carpet layers are coming in before the walls have been painted, or painters come in right after the drywall has been hung and before the finishers can do their job.

“They built the Empire State Building in 14 months. Now it takes three years to complete these 15,000 square-foot trophy homes we work on, and it is a battle every inch of the way. On a personal level, we are getting older now, and it is nice not to have to put up 20 rolls of tape or hang 100 sheets a day, like the legends of old. But from the safety and production perspective, this ‘protocol-less’ operating basis is for the birds.”

It Pays to Be Safe

As for other approaches to safety training, the Arizonian includes “safety topics with the pay checks. To receive their pay, employees have to sign off on reading them, including filling in what the topic of the piece was, so they have to read enough of it to know.”

In Washington, a contractor’s bookkeeper handles safety: “We have a safety manual of materials sent by various associations, including AWCI. When a new employee arrives, I show them videos we received from OSHA, as well as reading and signing off on the safety manual.”

A Floridian reports they “hold monthly safety meetings, and most of the time, GCs on bigger jobs hold weekly meetings. I’m cheap, so they are just quick talks. I don’t want to spend time showing videos at drywall rates. It might seem strange to have to tell them to wear goggles, but these are construction work-
ers, and they need to be reminded every day. In the past three years, we have only had one small accident, but I still pay lots of worker’s comp.”

In Indiana, a contractor with 35 employees says, “Most employees received a 10-hour OSHA training course when they come up to their carpenter apprenticeship. In addition, we have an in-house safety training program and supervisors provide weekly 15-minute long job site toolbox talks. We also work in conjunction with our local unions and have an incentive program, too. Every six months, those who have not had a work comp claim are entered into a drawing for prizes and cash. Last week, we gave away a $500 shotgun. It’s effective, too: In the last year, we have only had one claim—for a bee sting.

Toolbox talks were a common item for most contractors questioned, and some had their employees attend safety meetings put on by insurance industry people or suppliers. Such a program resulted in a 75 percent drop in accidents for a Michigan contractor.

A North Carolinian also uses toolbox training periods to update employees on the most current items on the market, as well as changes in rules and regulations. They also work with the state OSHA, are also members of the local safety and health council, and attend training classes and safety congresses.

“What works for many people is the 30-hour OSHA training, the construction outreach training program that certifies someone to teach our employees,” he says. “Safety has been improving industry wide, and it is because GCs are more safety conscious and pass it down to their subs. For me, what’s driving it is making sure nobody is hurt. Generally, it is insurance rates and bids driving the improvement—GCs requiring and being more observant of safety practices than they used to be, and so ensuring those subs they take on have their own safety programs in place.”

Obviously, safety isn’t just a matter of imparting information. It also takes hard-cash investment in equipment. One Minnesota contractor with less than a dozen employees, most of whom had been with the company for three decades, invested $80,000 in a new scaffold to ensure safety. “We always make
sure we have good, OSHA-approved, laminated planks,” says the boss.

“We stressed safety in our company long before it became mainstream,” says a New Yorker employing between five and 25 staff “It really comes down to dollars. OSHA is a minimum with our safety program, as the blue chip companies we deal with take safety to the nth degree. We utilize a written PBCA safety program as a framework and update it as we go. We send superintendents and foremen to the Building Construction Institute in New York City for classes in all the angles on safety. We also have a weekly toolbox talk that goes with the paychecks. Employees have to sign off on it to collect their pay.

“I am union, so the people I hire are supposedly qualified and trained by the union. But when I hire people, I give them a package that is an inch thick, which includes our safety program, and they have to sign off that they received the program. It is really up to me to enforce safety as an employer and set the standards. And my biggest challenge is getting the old workers to conform, to wear safety glasses, hard hats and respirators when they should. I can’t fire good people, so I stay on them. Sometimes it is a knockdown, drag-out fight and when I walk off the site, they no doubt take off the gear again. I also appeal to their better sense, that they can’t afford to harm their family by being injured.

“I am also onto them because workers’ compensation rates are so high. Any claim zooms the rates even higher. We just got over the ‘inquisition’ by workers’ comp after an employee died a couple of years ago—he went out to his car at lunchtime and died of what turned out to be an embolism, of natural cause. It was not job related. But the insurance company gave us a surcharge for three years because the mans heirs took us to court over this death, saying the man was exposed to fireproofing, paint and other materials. We passed the OSHA investigation, but we are still being sued in civil court because in New York, you cannot sue your employer, but you can sue who the employer was working for, who in turn can sue the employer—a third party lawsuit.

“These are really the biggest problems for employers when injuries occur on the job: Workers’ comp rates increase
and you are subject to third-party lawsuits. And when someone does get hurt in a smaller company, it means a large percentage of the work force is out of commission.”

**The Big Boys**

Lastly, to have a comparison, we asked the safety director of a Pennsylvania contracting company grossing $100 million and employing 500 people, how the big boys do safety Apart from his own salary, the company spends $50,000 a year on training—about $100 per person, which is not that high a figure.

“We have a full blown program,” the director explains, “with new-hire orientations. We run 10- and 30-hour construction safety courses. We do weekly tool boxes, of course, which is bare minimum. We do on-site job-specific training, job-safety analysis training, everything from A to Z. Sprains and strains are our biggest problems, but we always work in pairs, so everyone has a partner
to help with lifting, etc. We run six-monthly incentive programs giving away shirts, jackets and gift certificates for every working employee. This increases awareness, which is what the program is all about. I am also a member of many safety councils in this region and an authorized trainer for OSHA.

“A for smaller companies, I’d say the best safety tool is training and education. The excuse of not knowing what’s right and wrong is no longer acceptable. That’s what I have heard before from 10-man, owner/operator businesses. They don’t know the OSHA regulations, yet they hire accountants to keep their books, so why not consultants for their safety issues? It would keep them out of lawsuits and litigation over injuries.”

**What’s Behind These Accidents?**

Obviously, nobody decides while climbing into their truck on the way to work that they will injure themselves that day, but about 17 workers actually wind up dying on the job site each day in the United States. Why?

We have pat answers such as stress, rushed and cluttered workplaces, some people are accidents waiting to happen (see the Cooler Chat sidebar), but there are certain factors that underlie these.

The simplest is the employee does not understand something about safety or the tools or procedures of their job, or something else about the job site or industry. For instance, what does the word “safety” mean? You can talk about safety at someone for years, but how useful is that if his actual, working definition of “safety” is based on the idea that safety is for wimps—a idea he got as a child when he saw a younger boy floundering down the sidewalk with training wheels on his bike. Mention “safety” and he switches off, even if he is sitting in front of you at the toolbox talk, each word going in one ear and out the other, while he dreams about the big new tires he is going to get for his monster truck at the weekend.

The other, key reason is the person is connected to somebody who gives him a hard time, constantly makes less of him, his efforts, his possessions, his looks, his products, his truck, etc. Such a person ends up being an accident waiting to happen, and until he spots and disconnects from that person (whether it is gramps, mum, dad, bro, wife, neighbor, “best friend” or the local sheriff), he will continue to fail in life. It’s worth thinking about when you have someone who is accident prone.

Otherwise, the message that seems to be coming across from the contractors surveyed is that safety is alive and well in the minds of most employees, and that the right way of doing something is the safe way. Amen to that.

**About the Author**

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