What follows are the “essays” submitted by AWCI member contracting companies that have been nominated for AWCI’s Excellence in Construction Safety Award over the last couple of years.

The nomination form asks nominees to tell AWCI members “what makes your safety program work” by submitting a brief statement on “Three Tips for Managing a Successful Safety Program.” As you will see, some stuck to the strict 1-2-3 format while others provided a more descriptive narrative. Regardless, all have something to offer.

You could find some very useful information in one or more of these, but if you know that the company is three times larger than yours, you may not think it will apply to your company—and vice versa, if the company is five times smaller than yours. Therefore, no information about the companies is provided in this article.

Just know that all of these companies are industry leaders and we’re all winners when we keep it safe.

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1. Top management must be engaged. Without this support, the rest of the organization will, at best, only provide lip service. Top management must address safety at every major company management meeting, whenever they interact with field personnel, and provide resources without equivocation.

2. The field superintendents must run the nuts and bolts of the company safety program.

3. If you want it done, it must be measured and reported. Measure it in terms of factors the affected people care about, provide timely feedback on how well they are doing, and hold them accountable for their numbers in both their formal evaluations and their pocketbook.

And finally, effective safety is The Proper Execution of Work.

I am a firm believer in the old adage that “What gets done is what the boss man checks.” A half-hearted safety program is doomed from the start. However, if a safety program has 100 percent commitment from management, it is off to a very good start. If employees are given the means and opportunity to work safely, they know that management really desires them to work safely, and if they know that safety is equal to production in their performance appraisals, they will work safely.

Another critical component of a successful safety program is an advocate. This is usually a full time safety director and possibly his staff, depending on the size and makeup of the company. A big part of his job is to keep the program fresh, interesting and ongoing. The level of enthusiasm should equate to the enthusiasm of the employees for the safety program.

A third and probably paramount thing that makes a safety program work is the buy-in and involvement of all employees. They must help develop the goals if you want them to share in the goals You must involve them in developing the solutions since you must have their help to implement them.

Companies have safety programs as varied as the companies themselves. Evaluate what is working well. Don’t hesitate to ask the new guy out there sweeping floors, the middle managers or the boss what he thinks is good and what needs changing in your safety program.

These three things should give any safety program a good start. It’s a little like raising children: You are not sure how they will turn out, but you take one day at a time, work hard and pray they turn out well.

Safety programs are great, but it takes enforcement and training for those programs to maintain a safe workplace.

We have implemented some programs that have saved us money and injuries. One is a drug-free workplace. We do pre-employment drug testing, post-accident drug testing, and are soon to enter into an agreement with our local carpenters’ union for a random drug-testing program.

Second, we implement a return-to-work program, which keeps the worker working during an injury and assures the injured employee that his job is not in jeopardy. This is a perfect time to train employees in safety and company policy. By making training a part of the return-to-work program, it’s a win-win situation.

Third, listen and respond to employees. Employees want to be safe and know how to do so. But sometimes management falls into the “I’m in charge—don’t tell me” attitude, and this makes it hard for employees to approach and recommend fixes to most safety violations. This change in attitude alone in management can keep most accidents from happening. That's why we have an open-door policy to any management position, including the president of the company, and have made it so that safety has no seniority; therefore, anybody has the authority to correct safety issues.

We are committed to safety from the top down, and will continue to do so for years to come, because a good employee is a terrible thing to waste.

I strongly recommend these three tips:

1. Establish a craft tradesman safety committee

2. Provide safety incentive rewards for accident-free jobs that have safety practices, not just luck. Do not give cash. Give something like sporting goods gift certificates.

3. Make your program not just about OSHA rules, but mostly how to send everybody home with a paycheck and the physical ability to return to work the next day.
1. Start with safety. All new hires are required to attend a safety orientation and training before starting work.

2. Train your field supervision (foreman). Make him your Competent Person. He is the key to success.

3. Monitor your injuries, and react to frequency and severity.

Today, safety is a priority because of the insurance costs and OSHA fines involved. Three ideas that improved our program are as follows:

1. Have a written safety program that works. It was important to have the program be more than just words on paper. We made the words become real by earning the respect of management and field employees. The safety manager brought the program to life. Cooperation from the field employees makes the program successful.

2. Taking the advice of the field workers built respect and trust. This was vital for the program to succeed. Listening to the field workers was not enough. We also had to act on their concerns.

3. Create a safe work environment by taking care of the equipment. This involved a good maintenance program. Consistency with the policies and staying committed to them was essential to the success of the program. The creativity of new ideas in such areas as policies, incentive programs, training and goals was imperative. This held the interest and awareness of safety within the organization and formed team efforts.

Successful safety cannot be accomplished in a large organization without support and involvement from the top. While an absolute truth, this is well known and is not likely helpful for most organizations. We all know that. Well then, what works?

First, it is hard to imagine a successful construction safety program without the daily care and attention of the craft personnel. We have taken the approach that implementation of safety is a line function. It is the responsibility of the field superintendents and their direct, right-hand men and women, the field foremen. We do not tolerate—yes, the word is tolerate—any one of these personnel to believe it is someone else’s job or that they are too busy. We do spend time and resources training these people in delegation skills.

Second, each and every site must have access to safety professionals with the engineering, OSHA knowledge and management skills to advise and sometimes direct program implementation. The foreman’s question, “What should or can I do?,” needs a quality resource for good answers available on a timely basis.

Third, quality safety performance must be rewarded. For the reward to be just, the performance must be measured. The standards must be set and the rewards identified and delivered when the benchmark is attained. Rewards require originality and must contain many facets to be effective. A poor-boy safety incentive program will not cut it. Money, recognition, trophies, advancement, privileges, money. How does your company reward production, profits, quality and management skills? Safety must receive equal or greater rewards. The reward system tells the field people who must actively engage in “not getting hurt” that this part of their performance is important.
Our company is establishing a special cover story in safety. In 1997, we had 774 lost work days and in 1998 the days increased to 849. Our safety program kicked off in January 1999 with careful planning and achievable goals. Our lost days dropped to 319 in 1999 and 158 in 2000. In 2001, we reduced our lost days to just two claims and only 40 lost days. Our man-hours grew from 229,000 in 1997 to 338,802 in 2001.

Our company hired a full-time safety director in October 1998. In November and December, the safety committee evaluated and put in place a plan of action for 1999:

1. Creation of a written program.
2. Incentive programs.
3. Disciplinary programs.
4. Training.
5. Awareness through our own weekly Toolbox Talks.
7. Intense job-site evaluations.

The first objective was and is to establish credibility and respect with the employees—this has to be earned, not demanded. Next, the awareness is vital. Both positive and negative reinforcement is important from top management on down.

We are creatures of habit, and we enjoy being rewarded, even with recognition.

This is our general plan, but it is much more detailed, and is carried out by a special group of personalities.

I feel what makes a safety program work is determination and staying on top of the employees, and proper training. Then, after that, just follow through with what you have taught. It is a never-ending battle; you have to go inspect job sites all the time.

We have 350 employees, and our goal is to provide a safe work place for everyone to the best of our ability.

We have worked hard since our program started. We recently won our area’s annual safety award and we would like to have another.
Leadership is surely the most important ingredient of a successful safety program. Almost no one comes to work looking to have an injury, but they occur all too often. That’s why we need a safety program. With the help of a good leader, we can evaluate the problem, set goals and plan a solution. The leader might be the company president, owner, a mid-management person or a safety professional. He must have the time, authority and responsibility to administer the program if the company is to meet its safety goals. If your safety leader has other duties, he or she must be ever-vigilant to assure safety is never subordinate to other business activities.

Service is an integral part of leadership. A safety leader must win the hearts and minds of all parties involved. This can be accomplished by being truly sincere in all safety activities. You have to believe and project that you are there to help, that you value them as people and employees, and that you respect them and will maintain their confidences.

Patience is probably the most important ingredient and the most difficult to maintain. To a safety professional, the plan seems so easy and logical. However, we might not be able to understand all the pressures and constraints on employees, and they may not be willing to tell us. Like earning friendship and trust, we must earn the confidence of our employees. Only then can we truly all work together to make this elusive thing called safety work to its full potential.

Safety and accident prevention are tools of production. We recognize that the responsibilities for safety and health are shared by management and the employees. Management accepts the responsibility for leadership of the safety and health program and for providing safeguards required to ensure safe conditions.

Our company believes that training and equipment are vital to ensuring a successful safety program. Special protective equipment necessary to the performance of jobs and projects is provided to all employees. In addition, weekly “Tool Box Talks” are held at all job sites to discuss safety regulations and procedures. Foremen’s meetings are held quarterly to provide safety training and to address any safety concerns or issues that may have come up on the job sites. All job sites are regularly inspected by the safety director as an additional measure to ensure safety procedures are properly followed.

All new employees of the company are required to pass both drug and alcohol tests, and the MUST program test. Our safety procedures are distributed to new employees in the employment package, and, upon arriving at a job site, the employee is given the individual training requirements for each particular job by the designated safety person at the site. In the event of an accident, the employee receives counseling upon returning to the job site to help cope with any ramifications the accident may have caused. In addition, the accident and all preventative measures are discussed at the weekly job site safety meeting.

The safety policy of our company and its affiliated companies is dedicated to providing a place of work that is free from recognized hazards. If a job cannot be done safely, it will not be done. Our futures are only built through our people; our goal will be to provide a safe and healthy work environment for all of our employees.
1. A safety program must have company-wide support. Financial support and a “safety first” attitude are essential for a safety program to be successful. Sharing statistics and overall costs to the company will help promote the idea of “safety first.”

2. Manage worker’s compensation claims with top priority. Reviewing claims with outside consultants on a quarterly basis can avoid repeating mistakes and provide new insights on how to fix current problems. Having a system set up with selected doctors to handle injuries avoids confusion and eliminates false claims early. Mandatory drug screening after accidents also can help filter out claims. Rehabilitation after a positive drug test helps create a productive employee rather than simply passing him on to another company where he might continue unsafe behavior and possibly injure someone else in the field.

3. Require safety training for new hires and continued training on a regular basis. Employees come from a variety of backgrounds and have different levels of experience. It is important for them to know basic safety issues and a company’s safety rules before starting employment. Continual safety meetings provide the opportunity to share new tips and ideas as well as address any issues or concerns that employees may have.