SAFETY PAYS, IN GREENBACKS

BY STEVEN FERRY

Safety is on people’s minds more these days, so we asked the safety directors of eight contractors, large and small, around the country, as well as an OSHA inspector, what was successful about their programs. We received some impassioned responses.

Like all the contractors we canvassed, a Connecticut contractor ran “weekly job meetings in which the guys talk about anything they have seen in the field that was unsafe, as well as weekly job safety meetings in which a foreman reads different items from an OSHA book. Everybody then signs that they attended the meeting and the GC collects the paperwork to ensure everybody attended.” He also provided all the usual safety equipment.

Taking a slightly more proactive approach, a Delaware contractor charges his general superintendent with the job of “making sure the
employees are working in a safe manner. All of our lead foremen are trained in safety. We have biweekly job safety talks to discuss different issues. They were effective at first, but after they’d heard them several times, they stopped listening. If somebody has an accident, we immediately investigate, report and then let everyone know what that person may or may not have done wrong.

“We have half-a-dozen minor injuries a year requiring a doctor visit, but no lost workdays. Every few years, someone ruptures a disk or something—we just had a guy on a scaffold in a tight location and instead of climbing down, he decided to save a few seconds of effort by swinging around to the side of the scaffold. He forgot that he hadn’t locked the wheels and the scaffold shifted on him. He dropped to the floor awkwardly not from a great height, and broke his leg, tore his knee and fractured his ankle in several places. He’s not going to be able to do his job anymore and will limp for the rest of his life. He could have done it right, he knew how and nothing was stopping him from doing it. He’d probably done that move a hundred times before and nobody knew. If we had a safety man on every job, we’d be out of business! Most of the time they can get away with unsafe practices, but one day the inevitable ‘accident’ will come about. You’re not supposed to be on a scaffold while someone is moving it, for instance. But after a while, they become tired of climbing up and down. ‘Hey Joe, push me over there,’ they’ll yell. Again, that works fine until Joe pushes him over there and a wheel hits something and the scaffold stops suddenly, jettisoning its load.

“Someday it might come to GCs having a safety person on every job,” adds the man from Delaware. On the other hand, maybe GCs could install wireless cameras on any site where things are not running smoothly in terms of safety, security or production. The cameras would be known to the workers and they might not even need to function (as with the speed cameras on European roadways), keeping the men guessing and on the up and up. But some GCs have gone down a different road as a solution to safety violations on the work site.

“Right now,” continues the Delawarean, “GCs put in the contract a ‘hold harmless’ agreement that indemnifies him—even when they’re 100 percent at fault. That’s what their insurance companies tell them to do to lower the GCs’ exposure and insurance rates. But my insurance company tells me, ‘We’re not insuring him, we’re insuring you.’ I don’t know how many contracts my insurance agent insures, but he says I’m the only sub asking questions. All the others just sign these contracts and maybe do not realize they’re self-insuring and will have to pay for the GC’s defense and fine themselves!

“Last year, we had one of these ‘slave labor contracts’ for $500,000 that
made us responsible for everything, and the GC, owner and architect responsible for nothing. I sent this contract to my agent, and he sent it on to my insurance company who sent it back with a laundry list of what they would and would not do. It went back and forth for a while with the GC, who was dealing with his insurance company. Our insurance companies couldn’t agree on what to do! It turned out that we both had the exact same insurance company! It’s schizophrenic! I called two other contractors with large contracts on that job and neither one had actually read the contract! They just said, ‘We don’t worry about that, we’re just concerned with getting the job.’ I never signed the contract but did the job anyway, was paid for it and retained my rights under the law.

Carrots ...

Positive incentive programs seem to work with some employees but not with others.

A Californian contractor scrapped its incentive program as there was no change in accident rates. Maybe pizzas and T-shirts were not that desirable to people from the Golden State.

A Floridian runs a safety bonus program that has achieved the desired result: “If everyone stays healthy for four months, they receive a $40 Wal-mart gift certificate. If someone is hurt, the bonus drops to zero for a week and then climbs $10 a month until it reaches the $40 payout amount. We also have a drawing every week for one individual to win a cash bonus. So now they expect to receive the bonuses and get mad at anyone who acts unsafe, in effect keeping each other in line.”

... And Sticks

OSHA Inspector Juan Chavez handles safety for one of AWCI’s members in Arizona. He runs “an incentive program—baseball caps, a bag or a tape measure, some tool of the trade—each week.” He also uses a stick when needed. “I visit the sites weekly, write a site-
survey and enforce the codes with the help of management. We have a three-strikes-you’re-out policy: verbal warning, written warning and third violation and you’re out. If there’s an immediate danger, we’ll send the employee home for the day, and they have to come through the safety department to return to work.

“My message is that I can’t take care of them, OSHA can’t take care of them, and the company can’t take care of them. Safety starts with them.” But Chavez makes it easy for them with training “We walk new hires through an orientation for an hour. All the foremen and leadership have the OSHA 10-hour (training program) in construction.”

The result of his approach? “This [AWCI member] company did not receive an OSHA violation last year.”

Asked what the main safety issues were in his neck of the woods, Chavez answers: “Not wearing personal protection equipment except when the GC demands it, seems to be the biggest problem. With some GCs, you wear it or you don’t work, so they wear it. But fall protection is number one in the construction industry. Guys will get up to a height and won’t take the time to do a hazard analysis. OSHA has given fall protection citations to three of the five companies that I deal with in the construction industry.”

Chavez adds that the high turnover in the construction industry means he is constantly teaching new people, and when 80 to 95 percent of the workforce is Hispanic, the fact that OSHA did not have many materials available in Spanish until recently made it difficult to get them up to speed on safety.

A Colorado contractor also uses the stick-and-carrot approach to good effect. He says, “The superintendent gives a verbal and then two written warnings, and we rarely have had to go to a fine after the third violation. Generally, the fine is whatever the homebuilder would fine us if they were going to fine us. And when we are fined, we just pass that through to the employee who was cited. Most builders follow the same verbal, two written and then fine sequence with us. Right now, the fine for no hard hats is between $50 and $100 per incident.

“I am in the process right now of putting together a safety reward program and tying it in with the superintendents as part of their bonus structure. Crews who have made it through three months without incident, injury or report, will receive a tool as a reward. They supply their own tools to work with, so that gives them something to help them do a better job and that they can keep for a while. It’s not just spent at a Burger King and forgotten about the next day. We’ve tried barbecues and games, but the employees respond much better to a direct reward.”

In addition to providing training programs, weekly meetings and PPE, Air-Tite Interiors of Chicago campaigns to create respect for self and coworkers. Their employees are aware of the consequences of unsafe practices, realizing that it is not OK to endanger coworkers or themselves and that any accident impacts not just the rest of the crew, but the families who rely on and love that employee.

The safety director invites their participation in various ways, including coming up with their own safety posters or slogans. One poster shows a beaver squashed under a tree he had been gnawing. ‘Just because you were born to
Morning safety huddles and weekly tailgate safety training encourage group discussions and participation.

“Out of 182,000 hours worked in the field last year,” reports the safety director, “we had 12 reportables, none of them lost-work cases”—impressive by any measure.

Safety Increases Production and Profits? Get Away!

The corporate safety director for San Francisco-based Anson Industries, Les Kanyuk, has the last word. He talks of a company that changed from paying lip service to safety to being paid handsomely for riding safety hard on the work site.

“It took us almost three years to change the mindset and attitude of employees. It had to start at the top, which is what happened for us when the CEO decided one day that making money wasn’t everything, and that our insurance rates going up like crazy with huge deductibles was not acceptable.

“Good training was followed by a citation system, whereby I, our superintendents and project managers wrote up to three citations to an individual if we saw him doing something unsafe. Any repeat after three citations, that person never worked for us again. If we saw something where the guy was doing something stupid and could fall and be killed, we’d write a citation and send him home to think about it for a couple of days. Until we began writing citations, the superintendent would warn the same guy 14
times and maybe the 15th time, he’d fall and die. But when he received that citation the first time, the guy was never going to do that again!”

Morning safety huddles and weekly tailgate safety training encourage group discussions and participation (the guys would fall asleep when they just read the weekly topic).

“We do monthly hazards training,” continues Kanyuk, “and we’ve made a training video for new-hires followed by a questionnaire to ensure they watched and understood it. Then we give them our corporate safety guidelines, safety rules and regulations that they have to read and understand.

“We rent scaffolds or lifts from people who provide certified training to our employees, or we have our own trained people provide the training, as well as on power guns, ladder and scaffold safety. We have one person providing forklift training, repeated every three years per OSHA requirements.

‘Although many people don’t believe in it, we do have a reward system. We have a point system so foremen receive gifts when they do well. Employees who have not received a written citation, nor been injured nor involved in an accident or incident, receive a safety award. Just about everybody receives a T-shirt or jacket, sweatshirt, hat—we give different prizes or awards every month. As we have so many different divisions—tapers, fireproofers, deckers, wallboard hangers, framers, roofers—one tool does not apply to all trades, so it’s easier not to award tools.”

Kanyuk does more than provide PPE. “We have made safety glasses, hard hats, work boots, knee pads, ear protection—all mandatory. And we’re experimenting with voluntary stretch exercises in our Northwest offices after the morning safety huddle. The guys spend three to four minutes stretching. They say it has really improved their back situations, etc.

“The guys who wear regular glasses have to wear side shields. And we have a full-face shield in conjunction with the safe-
ty glasses when they are doing certain things like using chop saws, drilling above them, drilling with saws. We have not had one eye injury since then—yet we had many before that. Wearing kneepads has stopped many of the injuries from screws and obstacles on the ground.

“We examine the work from an ergonomic standpoint, too, building benches, for instance, instead of putting the saw on the ground.

“We had a lot of safety issues before we started this program. We were a production-oriented company with the approach of ‘Just get it done any way you can.’ We had a lot of eye injuries, back injuries—you name it, we had it. But we have discovered that good safety practices and good housekeeping have resulted in increased production!

“Before, people used to climb over crap to do their work. They don’t have to do that anymore because good housekeeping by the guys themselves and also by scrap boys or utility men—often apprentices—keeps the floors clean so everyone can produce much faster. Poor housekeeping is the source of 40 percent of job-site injuries. So housekeeping is a key focus in our safety program: We demand all our floors be swept clean and, as a result, we’ve had hardly anybody slipping or tripping, no back injuries. It makes a difference, and it doesn’t cost that much to implement.

“Deckers are up there 20 feet and not tied off, so no wonder they make up 33 percent of construction fatalities. We’re the only company in the country that has made tie-off for deckers 100 percent at 6 feet. All other deckers in any other company have to tie off at 15 or 30 feet. Last year we had no one fall, whereas we used to have eight. A good fall-protection program means no one is worried anymore about falling.

“Overall, three years ago we had about 280 first aid and lost-time incidents combined. The next year, we went down to about 240, the next year 180. Last year, the figure rose to 200, but that was with an increase of 15,000 man-hours. And that included having to hire as much as 60 percent of neighborhood people on some jobs—folks who often come with no training and with a different attitude toward safety. They generated a high percentage of our incidents and accidents last year. Three of them claimed their backs went out after four hours of working, and for six months we had to pay for them with nothing to show for it.

“I always used to hear, ‘Oh no, we gotta do this? All this safety is going to cost our company a lot of money!’ It really doesn’t! When the [wallboard hanger] comes into a work area, he can hang [board] like crazy, instead of either cleaning the place up first or climbing over piles of studs and materials. Increased production from proper housekeeping alone is between 25 percent and 35 percent.
Kanyuk continues: “In Los Angeles, three weeks ago, I sent a foreman home for two days for standing on the outside of the cables, not tied off. I then had that guy come to the quarterly safety meeting, in front of 80 foremen, and explain to them why he thought his life wasn’t important enough for him to tie off. He was embarrassed—and his wife had just had a baby.

“I do a lot of dramatics. We had a decker in Los Angeles fall 18 feet and break his pelvis because he didn’t tie off. So we had the foremen at the district safety committee with the construction managers, superintendents, foremen and employees from the field. I told them all, ‘If this guy had died, I wouldn’t be standing here, his wife would be standing here telling you guys that she trusted you every day to take care of her husband. She had planned to live with him for the rest of her life, and now he’s gone.’

“I could see tears. They’re the shepherds, their guys are the sheep. They have to watch out for them all the time. Many contractors just aren’t with it. They just don’t believe. You’ve got to believe. I do.

“We do perception surveys, too, asking employees questions like, ‘What do you think of the way this company does safety?’ ‘Does your foreman believe in safety or does he just talk it?’ We completed the first one four years ago and the answers were, ‘This company talks the talk but doesn’t walk the walk;’ ‘This company just tells me to work safely and then turns around and tells me to hurry up and get the job done quickly, no matter whether safe or not.’

“Now they’re saying this company has really changed. Employees come up to me and thank me: ‘This is the greatest company, it really cares about us and our safety.’”

Hmm . . . a no-nonsense safety program creates loyalty, increases production, increases profits and reduces injuries. Could be something to this!

About the Author
Steven Ferry is a free-lance writer based in Clearwater, Fla.