

You Can Reduce Errors

A Good Error Containment Program Has Three Parts: Prevention, Correction, Follow-Up

by Susan C. Bakos

Errors are expensive, both directly and indirectly. They cut productivity levels and account for a large wasted chunk of office and plant budgets. Yet many contractors and their supervisors are unable to contain errors effectively. The same mistakes keep recurring. The same accidents keep happening. Everyone knows what they are and even who is making them, but they still don't stop.

According to a construction safety executive, "Mistakes aren't going to disappear just because you've found them. That's only the first step!"

A good error containment program has three key parts: *Prevention, Correction, and Follow-Up*. The supervisor should know in advance what steps will be taken to discipline employees guilty of repeated errors, specifically safety infractions, according to company policies. At the same time, containing errors shouldn't turn a supervisor into a policeman.

One contractor said his first attempt at reducing safety errors on a construction site met with failure, because he concentrated on the person who made the error rather than the error itself. "Soon workers were covering for each other," he said. "And we had a hard time getting to the bottom of anything. We turned the error containment program around by treating discovered safety infractions as a chance for teaching sessions rather than an opportunity for criticism."

Most construction companies have some kind of safety program. Accident prevention is a significant part of error prevention. While it's difficult to prevent specific accidents, general hazards can be minimized if people are periodically reminded of those dangers.

However, few supervisors think

about *preventing* other kinds of errors, even though they may be recurring too. For example, introduction of a new office procedure is almost guaranteed to produce a rash of paperwork mistakes. Many of those mistakes might be prevented if the supervisor carefully explained the new procedure, step by step, and provided written examples for everyone to follow.

Follow-Up Important . . .

For some workers, one explanation is sufficient. Other employees need more time to assimilate new instructions. They may misunderstand the original directions and proceed incorrectly, repeating their mistake each time they use the procedure. Thus it pays to do a quick follow-up check when some new method has been introduced. If people are not following directions, repeat the instructions on a one-to-one basis. And check completed work again until you're reasonably sure employees can handle this job without making mistakes.

There's more to correction than simply uncovering the error. Discuss the mistake during a private conference, then follow with a written note. A worker in a panelization shop who's violated a safety rule should receive a written notice, not only as a disciplinary measure, but also as a means of reinforcing the importance of this safety infraction. Office workers can use similar written notices as working guides to prevent future mistakes.

Maybe the error is made repeatedly through carelessness or inattention. Or maybe the mistake being made is extremely costly. Then corrective ac-

tion may also include some form of disciplinary procedure. If so, employees should know about this in advance. Don't enact a disciplinary measure for errors when they didn't know such a practice existed.

If the same mistake is being made by several employees, the problem may be in the training program. Corrective action here would include retraining. Says an office manager, "This is the time to use those errors as illustrations in a teaching session. Without mentioning names, do cite specific working examples of this error. Make it clear that the problem is general; and don't single out people who are making the mistake."

A good *follow-up* program will increase your chances of success in an error-containment effort. You know where the mistakes lie. They have been discussed with examples, explanations, and checklists provided wherever possible. Now, keep a written record of all repeating errors on a weekly or monthly basis.

In Writing . . .

Without a written record, it's difficult to measure progress. It's too easy to say, "Things seem to be getting better." But are they really? And how much better? Keep department charts as well as noting individual performance on employee appraisal sheets. If some workers continue to be responsible for a disproportionate share of errors, they may need special help. Written documentation will be necessary to prove they really are making more than "their share" of the mistakes.

Insisting that responsible employees correct and/or re-do their work can

sometimes put an end to careless mistakes. "People will try harder if they know they're ultimately responsible for correcting their own mistakes," says a supervisor. "Of course, supervisors must set a good example by admitting their own mistakes!" Don't blame someone else when you're wrong or expect staff to correct your mistakes for you.

Finally, unhappy employees make more errors than happy ones. If one person is truly error or accident prone, maybe the cause is job stress or boredom, or a personal problem. Find out what's wrong and offer help if possible.

CHECKLIST

Prevention:

Discuss the places where mistakes most often happen. Provide adequate explanations for new procedures. Check immediately for errors before they become "set" habits.

Correction:

Uncover the error and find out why it happened. Repeat directions, provide examples, checklists. Follow oral directives with written notices. Use discipline where applicable.

Follow-Up:

Keep a written record of errors and accidents. Schedule conferences for employees who are error or accident

prone. Make sure employees and supervisors are responsible for their own mistakes.