Communication Is the Key to Minimizing Jobsite Injuries

BY KEVIN JOHNSON

Construction is a hazardous business, but accepting that as a given is a bad business practice.

Jobsite accidents can cause great physical and emotional pain for everyone involved. While not intending to minimize the personal suffering of accidents, any job-related injuries must be viewed for their potential effect on business operations. The results can be devastating. Injuries not only impact the available workforce, but also have serious...
potential implications on overall budgets and project delivery dates.

Any accident or injury on the job has the potential of triggering a worker’s compensation claim and, in some cases, litigation. In today’s litigious society, it is not uncommon for an injured worker to sue everyone involved in the project—general contractor, construction manager, architect, engineer, etc. Whether these claims are legitimate or not, they can have a real impact on the

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project in terms of increased insurance costs, legal fees and, in some cases, substantial monetary settlements. Particularly for smaller companies, these types of lawsuits can put a company out of business.

Through careful planning, attention to detail and constant vigilance, a construction site can be a safe environment
for workers and those walking by. However, the statement that every accident is preventable needs to be more than a motto on a wall. It must be a way of life on every construction site. From the day the first signs go up announcing a hard-hat area to the final site cleanup, safety needs to be the number-one priority of everyone involved in the project. Any injury, especially those resulting in lost-time, must be viewed as unacceptable.

### Stay Alert and In Control

A commitment to clear communication is essential to maintaining control of the jobsite. By keeping everyone aware of their surroundings and reminding them of the potential dangers, accidents can be minimized. Though the project management team is directly responsible for establishing and maintaining a safe environment and work practices, safety must be the responsibility of everyone on the job—from the laborer to the project superintendent—and its importance as a number-one priority must be communicated to all workers involved with the project.

The commitment to safety needs to be continuously reinforced at the jobsite. Signs, weekly trade meetings and constant site inspections are vital for ensuring that
every day is a safe one. In addition, project leaders must rec-
ognize that maintaining control requires more than being
aware of Hazmat procedures, material handling and storage,
sanitation, fire alarm and control systems, safety nets, cleanup,
etc. It requires being aware of and dealing with all potential
issues that could compromise overall jobsite safety.

Drug and alcohol abuse is a major threat to everyone’s safety.
An individual who shows up at the job under the influence of
either poses a serious risk to themselves as well as others
around them. Tolerance for such actions must be zero, and a
clear company policy should be in place and be communicat-
ed to all company and subcontractor employees. The work site
is dangerous enough without “overlooking” someone who is a
potential risk.

**Impact of New OSHA Regulations**

OSHA has instituted several new requirements that are affect-
ing most large-scale construction projects, especially high-
rises. These requirements include the new scaffold standards
instituted in November 1996 and the safety harness laws

The scaffold laws require “competent person training” for the
use and inspection of scaffolding. These stricter standards also
require a minimum of two scaffold inspections per day by qual-
ified individuals. Though there is some cost associated with
training workers under the new guidelines, the result is a much
safer scaffold system and workers who are more aware of prop-
er scaffold erection, maintenance and loading techniques.

The safety harness laws require the use of harnesses instead of
the traditional belts. The use of the new harnesses is a signifi-
cant improvement in life-safety and injury prevention. With
the new harness systems, a worker could fall several stories
without being injured and be back on the job the same day. If
a worker made the same fall with a belt, the fall would be bro-
ken, but the sudden, powerful jolt would be concentrated on their midsection and would likely result in a back injury.

These new regulations make sound sense from both a safety and business standpoint. Any short-term costs associated with implementing them are easily offset by the potential for lawsuits resulting from a single accident.

**Coordination of Trades**

Another key to maintaining a safe work site is careful planning, phasing and coordination of the construction schedule. The “push” to finish the project early should never outweigh the need to put safety first. There is a daily sequence for how work should flow and what needs to happen at which time. The phasing of work should be clearly laid out in the pre-planning process and thoroughly evaluated and updated on a daily basis.

For example, on a high-rise project, steel erectors, precast erectors and window installers might all be working at the same time. While each of the trades will be conscious of those below—with the required catch-alls, safety nets and debris guards in place—simple planning can help maximize everyone’s safety.

Activities should be staggered so that the steel erectors are working on the north face, precast on the south face and window installers on the east face. Such coordination helps ensure everyone’s safety without impacting delivery schedules.

It also is important to remember that first on site doesn’t guarantee timing privileges.

The first subcontractor to arrive in the morning shouldn’t take priority over the lifts or the flow of work simply because they are on site before the other workers. The construction sched-
ule must be followed and controlled, otherwise, the project will fall behind schedule and the risk of injury increases.

**Keep It Posted**

One of the best ways to remind people to think safety is to post it. Signs help reinforce awareness of the immediate dangers and general safety rules. From the perimeter of the site in, proper signage should direct people to their respective areas and inform them of any potential dangers. As a general rule, the more signs the better.

There are three types of safety-related signage that should be posted on every construction site: wayfinding, immediate dangers and reminders.

Wayfinding signs should be clearly posted with all gates numbered and all evacuation routes easy to follow.

Immediate danger signs alert workers to their current surroundings, such as “Danger High Voltage,” “Hard Hat Area,” etc.

Reminder signs work to reinforce overall awareness of safe practices including signs such as “Remember to Lock Out/Tag Out,” “Dust Control Area?” and “Always Wear Protective Eyewear.”

Safety is everyone’s concern. It shouldn’t be something that is just discussed at weekly meetings or “passed off” to project management. It must be reinforced, almost religiously, to keep everyone fully aware of the dangers on a construction site. Everyone is responsible for thinking safety, talking safety and acting safely.

**About the Author**

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