

Power Plan: Three Steps to a Jobsite Safety Program that Works

by Philip L. Colleran, CSP

An effective jobsite safety program is easier than you'd think. Some old basics still apply. Make a small investment of time now, before accidents occur, or spend it later when a valued worker's livelihood and possibly the future of your business is ruined by needless injury.

Put everything you've read about safety programs aside for a moment and remember three basic components of any successful accident prevention program:

- Inspection
- Training
- Enforcement

None of these basics is new. Safety practitioners have advanced them for decades. How they're carried out on today's construction worksite may need some rethinking.

Inspection:

Since the post World War II era, construction contractors have been designating "Competent Persons" to handle jobsite safety responsibilities. A Competent Person is one who:

- understands the hazards associated with the work at hand,
- understands what safe work practices can be used to avert hazards and, most important,
- has the authority to (and actually does) carry out prompt corrective action.

OSHA Requires "frequent and regular inspections of the jobsites, materials and equipment to be made by competent persons designated by the employers".

For the small to medium-sized construction contractor, who can't afford the luxury of full-time site safety coordinators, the designated competent person is most often a first line supervisor or foreman. It is a fortunate contractor who can hang on to a core group of foremen and invest in their development as effective managers. Regrettably, the construction industry faces business cycles that keep both first line supervisors and hourly workers in flux. Hourly workers may be employed by as many as three or four different contractors in a given year, each with their own particular method (or lack of method) of approaching jobsite safety. Foremen are contractors' first and last lines of defense in assuring a smooth job, yet frequently the least equipped to deal with basic safety management. They haven't received the proper training to be effective safety managers, the message hasn't been driven home that they are critical in representing the Company's interests or they haven't been authorized to spend the necessary time and money for safety. When a job inspection reveals easily recognized hazards, such as an unguarded work platform, the foreman isn't being "competent". Regardless of whether a foreman recognizes or acknowledges a hazard, corrective action hasn't been taken. From a foreman's point of view, other priorities often come first - production being number one. (Foremen used to be called "pushers".) A common complaint of foremen is the mixed messages they often get from upper management who emphasize "Safety First" and "Get it Done" in the same breath.

How often is "frequent and regular"? A 30-year-old edition of the Associated General Contractor's Manual of Accident Prevention describes frequency as "hour by hour, minute by minute..." Relax. It's not as stringent as it sounds when taken in the context of what first line supervisors' duties really are. No one can reasonably expect to be all places at all times. Omnipresence isn't required. Observation of the work product is. Safety hazards can be detected in that same process.

A site supervisor doesn't need to be a psychologist or detective to see "patterns" of behavior by his own workers or those of other contractors. Simply stated, if something doesn't look right, it very often isn't. In addition to observing work practices, a contractor's sixth sense is often called into play when inspecting tools, equipment and materials. A good time to make sure ladders, scaffolding and other types of equipment are in safe condition is during delivery and set-up. If defects are discovered at those points, you've saved yourself and others headaches and possible injuries later. Any observations of unsafe conditions or work practices should be a tip-off that closer scrutiny may be necessary.

A foreman who believes he's doing his boss a favor by overlooking even the simplest (and probably easiest corrected) hazards will eventually send Company profits to OSHA or costly litigation.

Written safety programs in attractive binders amount to lip service when set against a foreman's failure to understand, be made aware of or be given the role of eliminating hazards. Similarly, workers who face a disorderly and unsafe jobsite receive a clear signal that safety, and consequently the quality of workmanship aren't important.

Construction, by its nature is ever changing in terms of both workforce and environment. New hazards continually crop up and, because they are frequently serious, must be dealt with immediately. Workers who witness prompt corrective action of even simple things like housekeeping are converts and become "inspectors" themselves.

Training:

It has been the practice of many construction employers to hold weekly toolbox safety meetings as a method of complying with certain requirements to "instruct each employee in the recognition and avoidance of unsafe conditions" (and, hopefully unsafe practices). For some contractors that equates to a recitation of a prepared safety subject, often unrelated to the work at hand, and a quick sign-off by those in attendance. This practice insults the dignity of worker safety. For those who recognize a safety meeting as an important component of any effective safety program, it's an opportunity to orient workers to your company's work rules, to discuss upcoming hazardous operations and to involve workers in the planning of hazard controls and safe work practices. Additional sets of eyes and ears contribute years of individual experiences on what has worked and what hasn't.

When workers complain that the meetings have dissolved into gripe sessions, it's time to require each participant to become a presenter. They'll develop a personal stake in the process of making a safer worksite.

To the extent that lessons learned play a role in accident prevention, workers should be encouraged to discuss accidents, however slight, and near-misses with an eye toward saving their co-workers from potential injury. There should be no shame in re-counting the particulars of accidents or near-misses when taken in the context of valued human life.

Since many jobs involve a variety of employers and trades, information about hazards posed by other contractors may be necessary.

If the foreman is to assure the effects of his/her inspections are carried out, involving workers in the process is critical. The construction industry is probably the last of American businesses to enlist its workforce in the process of quality assurance, let alone safety. This is born out of a culture that for decades expected workers to come forth from some imaginary training program or hiring hall, fully equipped with every skill necessary to perform the work. It is also a culture that until only recently held risk takers in esteem and safety instruction and

training to be a matter of simply telling workers to "be careful" and considering safety in general to be "just common sense". In fact, on today's construction projects, safety is a great deal more than just common sense. It is sophisticated equipment and machinery, complicated erection procedures and demanding attention to specifications that dictates careful planning.

Field supervisors should not expect workers to recognize all hazards purely on the basis of their pay or experience. People often hold themselves out as more knowledgeable than they are; workers in as transient an industry as construction, no matter how experienced, need information about hazards before they go to work, not surprises which could result in costly backtracking or serious injury afterward. Supervisors should orient new workers and re-orient workers who may have been away and observe both more closely to establish that level of assurance. In turn, the fresh ideas "new" workers bring to a project often speed up the work. This doesn't mean hours spent in committees and meetings. It does mean deliberate actions that demonstrate you're following up and taking suggestions seriously.

Enforcement:

Accidents on construction sites are most frequently caused by unsafe acts and unsafe conditions. Unsafe conditions are largely the result of a failure to inspect and take corrective action, unsafe acts the result of poor training, poor enforcement or a combination of both. Assuming adequate inspections and training requirements are met, enforcement would be better considered "reinforcement".

Probably the most avoided, yet most critical component to the success of the program is enforcement. On its face, it signals to workers that a foreman is serious about safety in general. Many needlessly consider it adversarial.

Progressive disciplinary action systems take many forms. Some are very formal, incorporating multi-part forms, copies of which go to everyone, including the worker's spouse. Others are somewhat more human, yet just as effective. If you tell workers that you simply want them to go home to their families in one piece, they offer little resistance. This of course

again pre-supposes that the foreman is truly a "competent person", trained and empowered to take the time and given the resources to do the job of safety. Whatever form your disciplinary policy takes, keep some record of the corrections and worker advisories you make. It doesn't have to be an avoid verbal orders notice or a lengthy document. It should be initialed by another person familiar with the circumstances for purposes of corroboration. Foremen keep a daily log of job activities. Brief notations on hazard corrections can be made as well.

Your company's system of enforcement may begin with a verbal warning, followed by a written notice, then suspension, or dismissal, or similar combination(s).

It is vital that your enforcement mechanism be administered uniformly. If your brother-in-law gets different treatment than any other worker, your safety program has lost its effectiveness. In the majority of cases, no worker, however valued, goes out the door. What does happen if you take substantive action is that word spreads fast: "This Company really is serious about safety". In most cases, the success of a progressive disciplinary action program hinges on how and under what circumstances you tell a worker that he or she isn't working safe.

Considering the downtime associated with injuries, the ensuing paperwork, litigation and full range of other indirect job costs, it may be appropriate to take a step back and consider that:

- If our employee's receive clear signals that we're serious about their safety, they'll be on our side in pointing out hazards and correcting them before they cause an injury.
- If we take a few minutes before every shift to plan our safety strategy and ask employees what they've seen used on other jobsites to correct hazards, they'll have a stake in the process and won't want it to fail;
- If we follow through and *immediately* correct what employees point out as hazardous, or unsafe acts being performed,

they'll believe we're serious about safety and not just blowing smoke.

Completion of the job in a timely fashion can only be realized when workers are involved and receive a distinct signal that the company is going to listen to and, most important, act on their recommendations.

Because the construction industry is fiercely competitive, and its workforce so transient, contractors are often reticent to make investments of time and money on safety training and oversight. Down the pike, when those same contractors are asked for information about their injury experience or OSHA citation history before they're allowed to bid, those small investments will mean their failure or success.

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