SAFETY SOLUTIONS

CREATING A CULTURE OF SAFETY, ADOPTING SAFETY AS A CORE VALUE

Is there an acceptable level of injury in the workplace? Are accidents, incidents, and near misses inevitable? The answer to those questions should be a loud and resounding NO! Yet the injury and fatality rate in the construction industry would lead us to believe that, yes, we do accept injury as part of the job.

None of us—administrators, managers, or craft people—left our homes and loved ones this morning thinking that we might not come back, or that we could come back injured or permanently disabled. But that is exactly what is happening all too frequently. We become complacent, we fail to recognize the hazards of our day-to-day activities, and we develop "a natural tolerance for risk." These are the leading causes of injury and incidents.

So how do we change? Change must come enthusiastically from all levels of an organization, but it must start at the top. You must, as an organization, embrace safety as a core value of your company. This means that you put human life, safety, and health above all other demands. Once your employees see your commitment to their well-being, they will join you in your mission to create a culture of safety.

What is your role?

In the book *Safety 24/7 (Building an Incident Free Culture)*, we learn that:

- Everything we do carries an element of risk, and survival depends on how well we manage those elements of risk;
- We create our culture by what we demonstrate personally and by what we reward and tolerate in others;
- Each of us chooses our attitude toward safety;
- A strong safety culture begins when we start making safety a habit; and
- Creating a safe work environment is a personal issue as well as a corporate one.

All day, every day, we are faced with safety decisions, most of them made unconsciously with little thought of the risk involved in our daily activities. It would be an interesting exercise to perform a job hazard analysis for some of your daily activities. When you do your yard work are you using the proper personal protective equipment? Do you wear a helmet and eye protection when you ride your bike? How about reflective clothing when you walk your dog early in the morning or after dark in the evening? I know some of those things sound silly to many of you, but each one is a safety decision that you choose to make. When we choose to be safe, we eliminate risk and incidents. When we make the choice to be safe 24/7, we lead by example and demonstrate to our families and coworkers our own commitment, as well as what is expected in our culture of safety. We have made safety a personal issue. Now our employees will embrace safety as a value, practice "Safety 24/7," and be responsible for his or her own safety and that of others.

Your employees will "buy in" to safety as a core value when you empower them to do so. This means that everybody, from the top of the organization to the newest employee, has the right and responsibility to stop a job, report and discuss an unsafe condition with a supervisor, and take the corrective action necessary to proceed in a safe manner. This must be done freely and without negative consequence. Sometimes the risky behavior is not even seen as risky to the "old school" or the "bullet-proof guy," and they may become disgruntled or embarrassed by being corrected. They must be reminded that safety is the core value, and that any other priority is secondary. Either they will come around to your way of thinking or they will fall by the wayside. Either way, your organization and its people win.

Allow time for feedback. This can be done in the morning as you discuss your tasks for the day and how they will be performed safely. Feedback is give and take. We must all be prepared to discuss behaviors that affect safety. Discuss behaviors in a positive way; accentuate the good things you see as you discuss ways to improve. Feedback will and should go both ways and should be focused on behaviors—not attitudes or perceptions. If you do not provide feedback of an unsafe condition when you recognize it, you are responsible when an incident occurs.

Praise and reward safe behavior—people are motivated and respond in a positive way when you notice and recognize their performance and behavior. Promote safe people. This will send a message of what is expected of leaders in your culture.

Soon you will have developed a "culture of safety," where all of its employees hold safety as a core value, are a dedicated group who trust and watch out for each other, and see to it that they all go home safely to their families each day.

ICRI Committee 120, Environmental Health and Safety, would like to recognize Lee Sizemore for his contributions to this column.