SAFETY SOLUTIONS

CREATING A CULTURE OF SAFETY IN THE CONCRETE AND MASONRY REPAIR INDUSTRY—MOVING BEYOND REGULATIONS, PROCEDURES, AND COMPANY POLICY

GOVERNMENTAL REGULATIONS

Government agencies, with all of their associated rules and regulations, try to move the construction industry toward providing a safe work place for employees. Companies are legally bound by these regulations to provide safe working environments. Likewise, employees have the legal right to demand that employers provide a safe work place, free of recognized hazards, unsafe behaviors, and unsafe conditions.

The number of fatalities and injuries in the construction industry, however, remains stubbornly high. These laws and regulations do not have the expected impact of reducing the unsafe conditions and behaviors that are causing these injuries and deaths.

Although the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and other government regulators would like to believe their efforts to prevent injuries are effective, they are limited by how well employers implement the governmental standards and how those standards change the actual behavior of the employees. In practice, it is difficult to:

1. Introduce safety regulations into the work place that are accepted by the employees;
2. Have employees want to follow the safety regulations and demand a safe work place; and
3. Have the owners, contractors, and construction managers maintain safe working conditions in the work place.

To be sure, there are appropriate regulations in place to maintain safe working environments. But getting compliance is extremely difficult.

Unfortunately, these regulations don't have the positive effect we would like to see, and the employees and their families are the ones who are most affected. Even if employees recognize unsafe conditions or behaviors, they seldom take action to correct the safety issues. Often the unsafe conditions are created by a fellow employee whose job may be at risk if the unsafe behavior is reported, or employees are simply not given the necessary authority to make the corrective actions. Employees may feel that if they speak up, they'll be considered to be troublemakers or poor team players.

BEYOND COMPANY POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

In response to governmental regulations, companies spend a lot of time developing their policies and procedures. A company committed to its safety program will spend time, effort, and money to develop its own specific operating procedures to guide compliance to regulations, industry standards, and the safety of its employees.

In too many cases, however, a company simply purchases these programs to meet federal, state, or local government regulations and—in some instances—client requirements. By doing so, a company meets the legal requirements. Unfortunately, the program often sits on a shelf in the office. The employees who are most affected by a hazardous condition may never be trained in the proper safety procedures and never have the benefit of a safe work area.

THE TRAINING SOLUTION

Training is the logical answer to effectively implement regulations, policies, and procedures into the field. All anyone needs to do is look at the size and depth of the training industry, the time spent on training, and the amount of training required by OSHA and private industry to understand that everyone feels that this is the primary way to effectively get critical information on company expectations, legal requirements, regulations, policies, procedures, and work standards into the work place. Even with this major emphasis on training, injuries and fatalities in the construction work place continue to occur.

EMPLOYEE'S COMMITMENT TO SAFETY AND HEALTH

The driving force for safety does not come from state or local regulatory agencies and their regulations. Safety does not come from the company and its written policies and procedures. Nor does it come from training programs, regardless of the amount of effective training given to employees. Rather, safety comes from *the employee's ability to be an effective part of the safety process*. The employee's personal commitment to safety is the key ingredient.

CREATING A CONTINUOUS CULTURE OF SAFETY

Creating a continuous culture of safety is not easy. Unrealistic production requirements, compressed schedules, and tight budgets can often create intense pressures to accelerate schedules and accomplish work tasks with fewer people. Companies and their employees are strongly committed and feel a sense of urgency to produce the results required by their clients. They understand time is money and, under this kind of pressure, they can make decisions that exceed the limited resources or capacities required for creating a safe environment.

Gregory M. Anderson and Robert L. Lorber, PhD, have authored *Safety 24/7 (Building an Incident Free Culture)*, which describes how safety can become part of everyone's personal culture. Not just at work, but 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, regardless of outside influences and pressures. This very powerful story demonstrates how employees can personalize safety.

A common thought among employees is, "We have done this in the past and nothing happened, so why should we change the way we work now?" This is referred to as "old-school mentality" or "a bullet-proof mindset," and aptly describes employees who have become complacent and take their own safety as well as the safety of others for granted.

Accepting risk as a natural and expected part of our work routines may not be seen for the hazard it is. We can't see each individual employee's attitude toward risk, and different employees will have very different levels of risk tolerance. What may seem safe to one employee may seem reckless and unsafe to another.

We often hear the statement, "Safety is number one." If we think about this statement though, we see it implies that safety is often not the first priority of the job. Priorities can, and often do, change on a project. Safety can easily lose its number one status when production pressures push employees to complete a project ahead of schedule. Continuous compliance with safety regulations and procedures is dependent on safety becoming a company's core value instead of a safety culture that promotes production first, with safety an important part, but not a driver, of everything that happens on a job site

When a company truly has safety as a core value, its employees will demand safety regardless of other job pressures. When this occurs, employees are supported, backed, and empowered, not only for their own safety, but for the safety of their fellow employees and everyone in the work area. Safety will become a core value.

Safety is much more than a company issue, it is a personal issue. Employee involvement is absolutely essential to creating a true safety culture. Companies cannot have a safety culture by themselves, no matter how hard they work at their policies and procedures. If a company establishes buy-in from employees through a safety 24/7 culture, then everyone wins.

In future issues of the *Concrete Repair Bulletin (CRB)*, we will focus on specific aspects of building a culture of safety within an organization. We will also share information that is new, interesting, and important to *CRB* readers pertaining to all aspects of safety in the concrete and masonry repair industry.

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