

Building a Culture of Safety at Construction Companies

Time, effort, comfort, and peer pressure are the foremost reasons employees commit unsafe acts when they *know* better but don't *do* better.

BY JIM STANLEY

Multi-tasking has evolved from a talent to a necessity to maintain the pace of everyday productivity. Whether an employee is talking on a cell phone while working or not wearing his/her personal protective equipment, many workers have placed themselves and other at needless risk to save time or be more comfortable. The bottom line is that the majority of construction accidents are not due to a lack of training, skill or knowledge — nearly all accidents are simply related to poor decision-making.

Many construction companies may terminate an employee because of excessive tardiness or theft, while overlooking a serious breach in safety rules. **Yet safety deals directly with physical well-being, including guarding against serious injury or fatal accidents.**

This article will take a comprehensive look at building a culture of safety based on good decision-making and will examine the philosophy, account-

ability, and structure needed to develop a successful construction safety program.

When Employees Know Better, But Don't Do Better

Think back to the person who taught you the first safety rule: Possibly, it was your mother giving you a warning about a hot stove (Hot, don't touch!). When most people are pushed into a decision, they are more likely to rebel against it, until they truly understand the rationale and risk behind the decision. The "it could never happen to me" attitude fills up emergency rooms throughout the United States on a daily basis with serious injuries, many of them life-threatening.

Sadly, carelessness in the workplace and the pressure to produce tend to go hand in hand and, in some cases, are rewarded. Too often, it is easier for a foreman to turn a blind eye and cross his or her fingers when observing a safety rule being violated than to slow down the process with enforcement, follow-through, and responsibility.

Time, effort, comfort, and peer pressure are the foremost reasons employees commit unsafe acts when they *know* better but don't *do* better. Many employees don't like being required to attend safety training sessions or, in some cases, obey safety rules. Many construction companies establish safety as a top priority but send mixed messages when something more important bumps safety to the back burner. Employee safety should be a value and a lifestyle, with a 24/7 approach.

Accountability for Actions

The superintendent, foreman, and lack of company training efforts are ultimately responsible for sustaining a culture that "permits" unsafe behavior. If there is no consequence for violating company safety rules, no way to enforce the safety program, and no program to point to any bottom-line accountability, a major change

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in the existing program needs to be implemented. Specifically, there are three key pillars of an effective construction safety program:

1. Commitment from senior management
2. Active implementation of a formal safety program led by mid-management (i.e., foreman or superintendent)
3. Employee involvement and practice through example and demonstration, not directives

It's not enough to make safety a priority. Safety must become an inherent company value because priorities always change, and such a commitment always begins at the top. All individuals want to succeed, best echoed by the old saying, "What interests my boss, fascinates me."

The term "accountability" typically tags along with a negative connotation of punitive or disciplinary action. In a compliance context, this word translates to everyone's owning responsibility for individual safety. There are three types of accountability:

1. Personal accountability
2. Peer accountability
3. Management accountability

How a Company Demonstrates Its Commitment

While conventional wisdom says employees criticize companies that impose strong disciplinary actions toward safety measures, the opposite is usually the case. Construction companies with a high regard for safety demonstrate a greater level of care and concern for employee well-being. When safety standards break down, serious injuries or even fatalities can occur, leaving families shattered due to carelessness and irresponsibility. Some of the most hazardous issues include:

- Falls
- Struck or caught by
- Electrical

While slips, trips, and strains may happen, fatalities and serious injuries are real and typically are related to one of the three areas above. For example, what would happen if there were no police to monitor traffic on the roads? You'd have a recipe for disaster. The same principle holds true with safety measures on a construction site. Cost and productivity correlate directly with companies that demonstrate a strong baseline safety program led by front-line supervision and employee participation. Safety becomes part of the job — it's universal.

Zero Tolerance

Companies need to have highly detailed safety procedures in place, ensure and account for employee training and awareness, and ultimately use a zero-tolerance policy for any violations. Employers must create a system of accountability that includes:

- Thorough training
- Strong policy
- Documentation
- Accountability to follow through with safety rules

To look at it another way, many construction companies may terminate an employee because of excessive tardiness or theft, while overlooking a serious breach in safety rules. Yet safety deals directly with physical well-being, including guarding against serious injury or fatal accidents. Therefore, employers need to address the issue of safety both severely and consistently. Confrontation may be unpleasant, but an employee may never get a second chance

to do his or her job safely if proper compliance measures are not taken seriously.

Emphasizing What's Really Important

Safety is about creating an environment where employees want to be safe because it's the right thing to do.

Asked, "What are the top three most important things in life?" and employees commonly answer:

1. Family
2. Faith
3. Health

"If someone were to say that he/she would hurt a member of your family, what would you do?" Most people would do anything in their power to stop that from happening.

Safety values, whether at work or at home, have the power to protect or ruin your family, faith, and health. If an unsafe action were to undermine any one of these values, would shaving off a few extra minutes by not putting on protective equipment or

skipping steps through a safety procedure still seem as important in its possible consequence? Safety shouldn't be a "have to," it should be a "want to."

Preparing an Effective Safety Program

At my company, FDRsafety, we recommend the following to establish a successful safety initiative:

Action items for top management

- Safety begins first with top management: focus on visual concepts, not just words.
- Create a program that makes sense to management and workers.
- Identify where issues exist and implement a program that serves best.
- Fully understand the responsibility and requirement to wear personal protective equipment.

Encouraging a culture of safety

- Encourage employee involvement and feedback.
- Develop a safety committee with the authority to create and implement changes.
- Select an employee from the workforce to function as a full-time safety coordinator with the responsibility of making safety changes without disciplinary authority.

Safe and Efficient

While the construction industry has progressed dramatically in increased productivity and quality, the on-site injuries are more prevalent, especially in the media. FDRsafety encourages a holistic approach to safety on construction sites. We believe a construction work site can have quality work, be productive, and have an effective safety program at the same time. **OHS**

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