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Editor's Message



How Can We Get Our Personnel to Think More about Their Safety? by Scott Arquilla

This issue of SBC Magazine focuses on Personnel and Safety. These two words have provoked much thought and even some frustration over my years in this business. I am sure that each of our readers has had similar feelings as well.

Our industry employs factory workers who, for the most part, are high school graduates. It is rare to find a shop employee who has had any further education beyond high school. Most have proven capable of learning to operate computer-controlled saws, read complex truss shop drawings and manufacture trusses that duplicate the drawings provided. In fact, line leaders are quick to recognize errors in drawings or cutting and point out the need to modify drawings or sizes of pieces if the need requires. These are excellent attributes that all truss plants wish each employee possessed.

However, safety issues confuse many. For some time now, our plant employees have been given annual two-hour safety training presentations. Our outside professional safety expert reviews lifting techniques, saw safety, gun safety and hazardous material communication with our employees. The second half of our program addresses safety concerns brought up by our employees. This is often done without management present so employees feel they are free to speak their minds without repercussions. Our safety expert reviews each comment with management after these meetings.

Further, we have had monthly meetings of our safety committee for the past four years. The committee consists of two management representatives and three shop members. We review accidents since the prior meeting. We have a suggestion box, accessible by non-management personnel only, where employees can submit suggestions for improvements. While these meetings do bring up safety concerns from time to time, most of the issues addressed concern housekeeping matters. At a recent meeting, topics we covered included cracks in concrete floors, rain water or ice forming near outside doors, and that the yard needs regrading. Lastly, every Monday morning, our shop steward, who is the worker responsible for safety in the workplace, presents a safety topic at the beginning of our shift.

I believe we have addressed many safety-related issues over the years and I consider our plant to be a fairly safe working environment. Yet, accidents still occur. In 2001, our accident rate fell again and was below the OSHA threshold. Last year, that trend reversed and we had five recordable accidents. I'd like to review three from 2002 that will stick in my mind as having been most frustrating.

Last summer, we had a lumber picker who broke his toe while lifting a tank of propane onto the floor of his forklift. His forklift wasn't out of fuel; he was planning to deliver it to another employee who had run out of fuel in the yard. He had lifted the tank twice and failed to get it up 18 inches to the forklift floor. The reason this accident occurred was that the employee is missing four fingers on his hands (not due to accidents at our plant). He didn't have the ability to lift the tank safely. He traditionally has relied on others to change his propane tank. No one was near our propane shed when he needed the new tank this time. So instead of waiting for help, he decided to try the task himself. But, while he was lifting the tank, three people returned to the work area and witnessed his accident. Fortunately, he did not miss work, but he was on light duty and performed his job slower due to the special shoe he wore for a month. I don't understand why he didn't ask for help or why the other coworkers didn't offer to help him. He knows what he should and should not do now.

Another incident occurred when an employee attempted to lift a truss out of a jig and it was stuck. The pop-up on the table failed to rise. The employee told us he attempted to lift the truss four times before he finally got it and a very sore back. He was off regular work for two months, went through extensive rehab, returned to work on a sit down job (do you have these at your operation?), and then sued us through the Industrial Commission for the partial loss of the use of his back and received a settlement. He had worked for us for six years and had seen the lifting video and received training annually during that time. He just felt he could lift the truss without help.

Lastly, a driver had a group of box ladder panels (rake overhangs on a gable end) fall off a trailer onto his neck at a jobsite while he was unstrapping his load. There were no witnesses. He never completed an initial accident report after the incident, although he finally did three weeks later. The driver was diagnosed with a cervical sprain, even though a second opinion suggested he had the condition for some time and the injury simply aggravated the pre-existing condition. He was off for over a month (during August) at home, received a number of medical procedures from three different doctors, and also seeks a settlement from us for the long term, reoccurring pain and numbness in his neck.

What is frustrating about these three (and all other) accidents is that OSHA will criticize our company's accident statistics based upon the workdays lost in 2002. It seems that no matter what we do to educate our employees about the value of thinking "safety first," all it takes is one foolish action to create an accident. My insurance broker always says we still have to pay for claims despite the fact that the employee was in error.

I have read a bit about safety incentives and, in early 2001, we instituted a pizza lunch for each thirty working days without a recordable accident. Last year, we purchased five pizza lunches out of a possible eight. This year, we will be having the lunches on a calendar month basis instead of every thirty workdays. If the accident rate falls, we will even upgrade the lunch or double the frequency if it helps.

We have several employees who never have had an injury. Then we have had employees who never seem to go six or nine months without something. Of course, the new proposal to reinstate the OSHA Ergonomics Standard frightens me. First, how can the employer be responsible for pre-

existing conditions? Second, how can the employer make sure each employee acts safely? In each case, we as employers are stuck with the employees we hire, no matter how good of a job we do exploring previous work experience. The system allows the employer, not the employee, to become the victim in many cases. If my employees were chemical plant workers or ironworkers, subject to hazardous chemicals and fall protection concerns, perhaps my feelings would be different. But we have spent many hours training employees and instructing them in the proper techniques in hopes of performing their job safely. Granted, I do not work in the plant. But I have seen enough manufacturing to determine what is hazardous and what is not.

Has anyone had better luck than we have had controlling accident rates in their plants? I'd be more than happy to hear of your ideas, as would SBC Magazine readers.

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