

# STRUCTURAL BUILDING COMPONENTS MAGAZINE

January/February 2004

## Editor's Message



### People & Safety by Daniel Holland

*WTCA President Dan Holland explains that effective personnel management and stressing proper safety procedures are matters of culture.*

This issue of SBC is devoted to the topics of personnel and safety in the workplace. I hope you will find the information presented to be helpful in your office. Below, I offer a few thoughts to get you thinking. I will examine personnel first and then safety.

Why do people work? Is it because they need to earn money? Do they work because they need benefits like affordable health insurance? Are monetary reasons the only reasons that compel people to work? Often we, as employers, focus on the money and not the other reasons that people work. Two of these other reasons are to have a sense of self-worth and to have a sense of community. Before you stop reading, take a minute to think about your employees and why they do what they do. I know the concepts of self-worth and community seem much too “touchy-feely” to be discussed in operating a serious business, but hear me out.

When you meet a person, what do you ask him or her? I almost always ask, “What do you do for a living?” Most people will tell you what they do for a living no matter what you ask them about themselves. What people do is very important to their concept of who they are. Why should this matter to you as an employer? Creating a career that a person is proud of and not “just a job” is the very best way to compensate an employee without raising salary or benefit costs. If you can make your employees proud of where they work and what they do, they will work harder, show initiative, and may even recruit for you!

How can you help your employees be proud of their company and their career? Fundamentally it takes respect. You can show great respect for your employees by making certain their workplace is something of which they can be proud. Make sure the restrooms are clean and are in good working order. Make housekeeping a priority. Reward good work. Pay for continuing education. Repair or replace things that break. Provide good tools. Speak to your employees with respect whether they deserve it or not. Lastly, one of the very best ways that you can show respect for your employees is to discipline any employee who is not doing acceptable work. This is especially true of any worker that is related to you or you are perceived to favor.

What about the concept of a “sense of community?” Perhaps a better way to say it is to use the word culture. Actively creating a culture that is desirable and respectable is valuable to your workers. If they like and respect the people they work with, they will probably continue to work for your company. Personal relationships between employees can be very beneficial to the

company despite the potential problems that they can introduce in cases of unequal treatment of subordinates or coworkers.

Changing the culture of your company takes time and effort. Every hire or termination affects your company's culture. Choose the individuals you hire with the culture of your company in mind. If two applicants are otherwise equally qualified, choose the applicant who can demonstrate personal character traits or interests that will move the culture of your company in the direction that you want it to go. Remove or cultivate workers who are keeping the culture of your company from being what you and your workers want it to be.

My final suggestion on the subject of personnel management is that you need to be an active manager. Don't ignore things and finally react to the "straw that breaks the camel's back." Actively seek ways to reward good work. Actively discipline and correct poor and undesirable work.

The subject of safety in the workplace also brings me back to the culture of your company. What attitude do your workers have about safety? Do they place working safely above production goals? Why do they think the way they do about safety? Most of the time your workers form safety priorities as a result of their coworkers' responses to unsafe conditions which are present during the employee's first few days on the job.

Consider a high hazard industry like the electric power industry. Electrical workers are very concerned about safety. Every one of them knows that one mistake on any given day could cause immediate death. Yet, the industry has very few safety incidents per hour worked. The electrical industry has a culture of making safe work habits an absolute priority. Some of you might be thinking, "Yeah, that's why my power bill is so high."

Safety decisions always involve risk versus reward. Some in the safety field don't like to think that way, but it is absolutely true. I once had a discussion with a "safety consultant" who advised me that my accident rate would improve if we reduced the number of overtime hours we were working. He was right, but I pushed him on the point. I said something like, "You're right, maybe we could reduce the rate even more if we cut back to 35 hours a week." He agreed. Then I said "I'll bet we could reduce it even further if we just didn't work at all." He didn't respond, but the discussion illustrates my point. The cost of safety must be weighed and balanced with the return.

If all of the effects of a safety decision are not accounted for in the decision-making process, you may not make the best decision. Consider savings that could be gained in non-tangible things like worker morale and lower legal risk. Most importantly, once a decision is reached, make certain that your employees know why the decision was reached and that their safety is a very high priority to you. They know that the long term profitability of the company is always the highest priority. They need to know that the safety of workers, customers and the public is your next highest priority.

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