

Resolved to Be Safe: *Tri-County Truss Secures VPP Distinction*

by Molly E. Butz

How one company's workforce rallied to earn OSHA's most prestigious safety award.

Safety discussions often revolve around the concept of "building a safety culture" at a specific facility or location. In theory, this safety culture would demonstrate the shared set of attitudes, behaviors, beliefs and values that everyone at the company operates within, management and employees alike. A solid safety culture is sometimes difficult to quantify, whether you're using injury rates, financial savings or something else; and knowing when your facility has met that quintessential "safe" mark is often unclear. In this case, however, Tri-County Truss of Burlington, WA, can zero in on *exactly* the day they reached their safety goal.

On June 19, 2008, Tri-County was awarded the Voluntary Protection Program (VPP) Star certification, a designation to recognize their exemplary workplace safety status and one of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's (OSHA) highest honors. Administered by Washington's Labor & Industries Division (L&I), the VPP identifies those companies that have "implemented a comprehensive safety and health management system" based on 33 separate elements ranging from Management Commitment and Emergency Programs, to Safety/Health Training and Preventative Maintenance.

A long and, occasionally, tedious process, Tri-County made the commitment to gain VPP status for a number of reasons. The evolution began a couple of years ago; Tri-County had been scaring up record profits while sporting a less than appealing safety record. Additionally, one of their biggest customers had suggested they look into the program. However, the driving force boiled down to one simple thing: they wanted their employees to come to work and be safe. A mission was born.

The implementation was much as you'd expect, from examining their current processes, procedures and policies to beefing up their safety committee and updating their reporting systems. On several occasions, representatives from L&I visited the facility to provide a consultation. Referred to as "mock VPP audits," these consultations gave the L&I team a chance to review paperwork and analyze Tri-County's operations from the ground up. "They would come through and tear your system apart," Scott Breckenridge, Tri-County Operations Manager remembers. "But it was nice; they were there to help us to achieve that [VPP status]."

And although each time L&I came to visit, *many* things improved, one alteration stood out: Tri-County empowered its workforce. This straightforward resolution to put the power back into the employees' hands placed both ownership and obligation with the people who matter most.

at a glance

- ❑ Tri-County Truss decided to seek a special OSHA safety status by teaming up with a Washington state agency to make its operations safer.
- ❑ The company earned the VPP award in 2008 by empowering its workers.
- ❑ As part of the process, inspectors interviewed 45 employees at random behind closed doors about the company's safety practices.

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"For instance," says Breckenridge, "we invite everybody when we start up a new piece of machinery or we're studying a process. We gather everybody around for a 'job safety analysis.'" This provides a controlled environment in which the employees can familiarize themselves with each new addition to their facility. Furthermore, the employees who will be regularly working with the machinery are given the ultimate responsibility of developing their own policies regarding the machine. "Those people work together in writing up the maintenance, operating and lockout/tagout procedures," Breckenridge explains, a hands-on approach that creates a good deal of ownership for their employees.

Tri-County also took their VPP participation as an opportunity to give their safety committee some real teeth. Previously, their employee involvement had been lacking with little interest and high turnover rates. Now, Breckenridge reveals, "the people that are elected to [the safety committee] are staying on one or two terms!" And they'd probably stay longer, but the VPP process limits an individual to two terms to keep the committee fresh. What's more, their committee members have "the responsibility and power to make changes themselves," instead of having the directives coming from management.

At too many facilities, Tri-County staff shares, the managers and executives make the rules and tell the employees what's going to happen; an unfortunate "here's what you're going to do" mentality. *Not* at Tri-County. Unsafe conditions mean that people are at risk, something their employees have been trained to correct. Even if it means delaying deliveries, their safety committee members have the authority to shut down production to ensure no one gets hurt.

The committee also investigates and discusses every incident, no matter how minor. "[A proactive safety committee] won't eliminate everything, but we take the time to solve the problem," Breckenridge explains. Even something simple like a scraped-up knuckle raises an eyebrow. "We want to know, 'how did that happen?'" And their significantly lower incident rates are proof that by "empowering the people" you'll get better results. "All the tiny little incidents and accidents add up to a bigger accident," says Breckenridge. "By *paying attention* to the small things, you drive the chances down for a big accident."

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Tri-County has also implemented an innovative program for new employees. "For the first 90 days, we require them to wear an orange vest," Scott describes. "Then all of the other employees know they have an *obligation* to watch out for [the new person]; to make sure they're using safe work procedures like proper bending, etc. They *all* make sure they keep the new person safe." Tri-County is also sure that they train everyone, new and old alike, to be safe in all areas of their lives. Not only are they encouraged to be safe at work, but also at home while they're mowing the lawn, working on the house or playing with their children.

Because of the safety-focused culture Tri-County has created, the employees expect everyone, managers included, to follow all of the rules. Even a quick trip through the yard to grab paperwork or deliver information will elicit a response if you're not following the rules. One foot out the door without safety glasses and you can be sure you'll get harassed right back into the office to put them on before you accomplish your mission.

Near the end of Tri-County's VPP certification process, their employee-driven system was put to the test. L&I made an unplanned appearance at Tri-County and asked for a copy of their employee list. Highlighting approximately 45 names at



At their certification ceremony in June, Tri-County Truss adds their VPP flag to their flagpole.

random, L&I informed Tri-County they would be interviewing each employee behind closed doors, no management allowed. With no preparation, no rehearsing and no talking to them before their interviews, they were split up into groups and questioned. "THAT will tell you if you have a safety culture," Tri-County staff shared. L&I was about to learn if Tri-County was "practicing what they were preaching." And you can be certain they were, only to be affirmed soon after by their award ceremony in June.

By now you might find yourself asking, with a safety culture that fierce, what is Tri-County's game plan to maintain it *and* their coveted VPP Star status? For them, the answer

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Brace yourself

Each small investment adds up to a big reward.

is simple: preserving a solid safety program is an every day commitment. They also sustain a very open line of communication. Before the start of *every* shift, the group gathers up to stretch for five or ten minutes followed by a safety huddle. Some days they regroup on an incident, others they discuss the potential obstacles for the day, such as hot weather, and then send a couple of folks out to the yard to check that there are sufficient water containers for the day.

If there's one thing Tri-County has learned it's this: each small investment adds up to a big reward. Injuries can cost "oodles" of money; as far as management is concerned, whatever time it takes to keep everyone safe is a tiny investment when compared to the alternatives. "Safety's not a short-term fix," they'll tell you. "It's going to cost you more to have an accident than it costs to prevent it." And, more than the financial savings, this culture shift ensures that *everybody* goes home safe.

At this point it's pretty clear that this not an easy process. From paperwork to employee participation, you've *got* to be in it to succeed. "It's not like you can just go through the motions; you don't get the certification without a commitment from your people," explains Roger Helgeson, Tri-County Branch Manager. "And, the most impressive part was the work from [our employees] and *their* commitment to follow through." And follow through they did.

One in an elite group of approximately 2,100 VPP companies and the *only* component manufacturing facility to achieve certification, Tri-County is rather proud, and rightfully so, of their ground-up program and employee involvement. Obtaining their VPP status was a three-year process and a big commitment for a lot of people. Along the way they acquired their VPP flag, which means that they cannot be subjected to a surprise inspection or any fines though they do participate in a maintenance audit every six months. But what matters most to this group after all they have accomplished? "People want to work in a safe place," they profess. And rest assured, at Tri-County, they do...just...that. **SBC**

Why Wait?

It happens. Sometimes throughout the daily grind safety gets pushed aside for seemingly more important things like production numbers and delivery schedules. The priority of dealing with minor incidents eventually falls by the wayside. Scott Breckenridge, Operations Manager at Tri-County, sums up just how important a focus on safety can be by recounting this succinct analogy shared with him by an L&I representative. "He put it this way," Scott recalls, "if your tire kept going low, would you just keep putting air in it or would you get it looked at? Because if it keeps going low, eventually it's going to blow out, and then you might drive off the road or hit something. So, are you going to fix it, or just keep putting a Band-Aid on it?"

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