



Safety Cents

Changing the cultural mindset around safety in the workplace is the most affordable insurance

Story by Robin Driessen Bruecker

How does a company build a safety mindset throughout, integrating it with other job functions so it becomes a way of work life?

"Developing a safety culture must start at the top," said Charles P. Howes, a safety consultant, corporate safety trainer and licensed private investigator for Integrated Risk Management Associates, an affiliate of Attorney's Process & Investigation of Green Bay. The firm's clients in northeast Wisconsin include construction, printing, plumbing, HVAC, warehousing, and manufacturing businesses.

"I have observed that the companies with the best safety records are companies where the president/CEO of the company sits in the front row and participates in the safety meetings," noted Howes. "When employees see top management actively engaged in safety training, they know it's an important part of the company's culture, just like quality and productivity."

A core value

Safety is one of three core values at mechanical, fire protection and pipe fabrication contractor J. F. Ahern Co. in Fond du Lac, the others being customer satisfaction and productivity.

"No one value is more important than the other and without each of these 'legs' supporting equally, the chair of success cannot stand," said Mike Schultz, director of safety. "Ahern's executive leadership drives this philosophy in everyday communication."

For the last 10 years, Ahern's safety record has averaged 2.7 times better than the industry average. The company has been recognized numerous times in the state and nationally for its safety achievements, most recently receiving a 2012 Wisconsin Corporate Safety Award from the Wisconsin Safety Council and the state Department of Workforce Development.

"These awards are great publicity, but more importantly, reflect the value our employees' efforts bring to clients," said Schultz. "Having a strong safety culture, our team is less likely to incur incidents. This helps keep our projects on schedule and allows for insurance savings to be passed along to clients on job quotes."

According to Schultz, among the company's many programs that enhance safety are job-specific safety pre-plan questionnaires; daily pre-task planning to identify, control and/or remove any hazards; and stretching exercises that get employees physically and mentally ready for the day's activities. This all leads to a safe workplace, which means less stress and greater job satisfaction for employees.

"Knowing that the leadership of Ahern supports a safe work environment reassures the employees that they should always make the decision to work safely and stop work if it is not safe," said Schultz.

Changing minds

Green Bay-based RGL, a supplier of integrated material management services, worked to replace one mindset with another after realizing that many employees viewed injuries as simply being "part of the job."

"The first step for us was to change that belief," said Carol Jamrosz, vice president of risk management, who joined the company in 1999 when the mindset for injury was prevalent.

That meant decreasing onsite injuries, followed by an employee training program to better integrate safety practices and foster the view that rather than being accidental, injuries instead resulted from unsafe behaviors or conditions.

"We gathered data using several years of past injury reports and interviews with employees to develop training material that helped us reduce the frequency and severity of injuries immediately," said Jamrosz.

Reading from the book *Safety 24/7: Building an Incident-Free Culture*, RGL held group sessions that combined discussions, role-playing with safety skills, and fun. The book has become required reading for all new employees, with all current staff having completed the training. Other training delivery methods include individualized, team-based, online, hands-on and visual.

Additionally, RGL uses a behavior safety audit, in which team members observe each other on the job and provide constructive feedback, Jamrosz said.

"RGL holds employees accountable for their own safety as well as the safety of their peers." Shared at the safety meetings, the audit results help identify unsafe behaviors and how to change them.

"Until recently, RGL was in a reactive mode," noted Jamrosz. "As we shifted to a more proactive preventive plan, our focus shifted from reporting injuries that already occurred to reporting near hits, and determining preventive and corrective measures."

One of those measures, begun this past March, is the Hazard Identification Risk Analysis (HIRA) process, which rates the hazards listed in facility audits and incident reports, Jamrosz said. RGL's HIRA team recently finished the first audit.

"Based on the scores, we then can prioritize where our resources need to be applied to develop control measures and eliminate risk. As a result of having fewer injuries, we have been able to devote more time and resources to injury prevention and developing new safety practice methods."

These team efforts to change the mindset from one of expecting injury to one of expecting safety have paid off. RGL, which includes RGL Specialty Services plus Leicht and Checker Logistics, received a 2012 Wisconsin Corporate Safety Award. RGL Specialty achieved more than a million work hours without an OSHA-recordable injury over four years. As a result, business has increased with existing and new customers.

"Workplace safety is the minimum expectation and is treated as the right and only way to operate," said Jamrosz. "Our employees are our most valuable resource, and their continued safety and well-being supersedes any other incentives that might result from workplace safety."

From the top down

In offering suggestions on how to foster a safety culture in the workplace, Jamrosz highlighted the importance of training, clearly defining safety expectations, and holding everyone accountable including company leaders.

"Our CEO and executive management team are passionate about working injury- and incident-free, and they willingly participate in safety training and lead by example," said Jamrosz. "We have found that management support and understanding provides a major boost in continuing to move toward an excellent safety culture. At RGL, team training and accountability coupled with consistency are key to continuously building a more excellent safety culture."

Ahern's Schultz recommends that besides safety-committed leadership, add another factor to create the safety culture: "You must engage every employee within the company when building, improving and implementing the program."

Our lives are divided into thirds – sleeping, working, and time with family and friends, Howes noted.

"Because we spend almost as much time with our co-workers as we do with our families, we may actually start to see them as an extended family of sorts. We develop relationships where the injury of one can weigh heavily on the minds of many.

"When it comes to safety in the workplace, it has to be a one for all and all for one mentality."

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