



# How Teamwork Promotes Safety in Construction

A Wolgast Restoration White Paper



*An Employee-Owned Company*

**When Mayhem Strikes... We Strike Back!**

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So what is teamwork? The dictionary defines teamwork as a cooperative or coordinated effort on the part of a group of persons acting together as a team or in the interests of a common cause. Safety is the common cause that this paper will focus on.

Safety is defined as the state of being safe; freedom from the occurrence or risk of injury, danger, or loss. In this paper we will share with you some barriers to creating effective teamwork, elements for promoting and enforcing effective teamwork and how each individual role in the work place is a piece of the puzzle to working together in promoting safety.

## Barriers to Creating Effective Teamwork

Fostering productive teamwork among your staff and focusing on safety will help your company to succeed. Teamwork without proper guidance leads to poor decisions and safety violations.

Effective teamwork can benefit a company with improved communication, broader collaboration and a greater sense of accountability to the group. But there are barriers to effective teamwork that managers need to be able to identify and eliminate. These include poor communication, unclear goals, lack of manager involvement, and big egos.

**Poor Communication:** First let's discuss why poor communication can prevent effective teamwork. While good communication can foster teamwork, poor communication is a barrier to developing a productive work atmosphere. Staff members who will not communicate, or are unaware of the proper communication channels to use within the team, can create breakdowns that prevent team development.

Managers need to be aware of the double-edged sword of team communication, and be able to identify when poor communication is hampering the group's success.

**Unclear goals:** A work team is created to achieve goals within the workplace. Those goals can be for a specific project, or they can be the ongoing goals that define the department's responsibilities. When those goals are not presented clearly by management, or the individual responsibilities of each team member in achieving those goals are unclear, then the team cannot work effectively. Team members are unclear as to what they are supposed to be doing, and job duties get distorted.

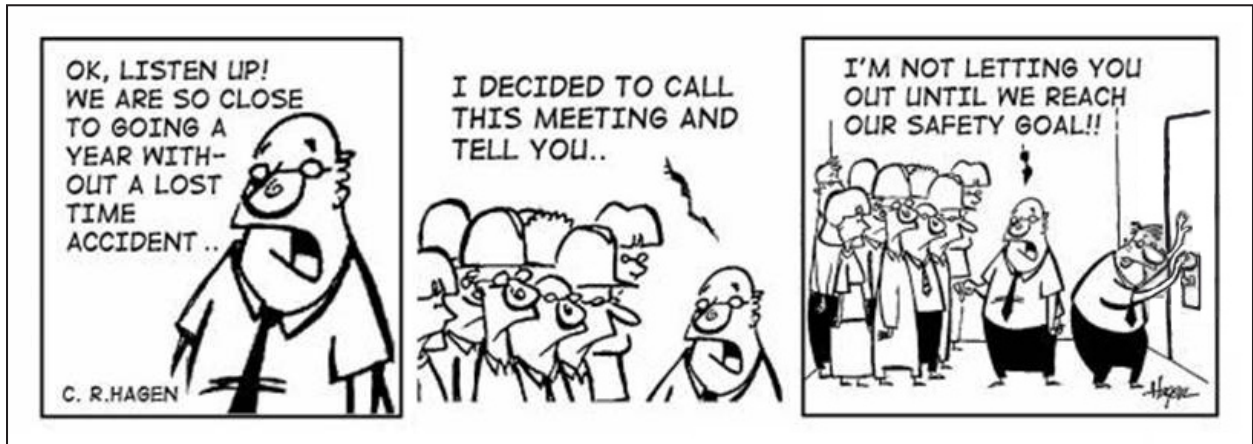
**Lack of manager involvement:** Managers create teams of qualified staff members in order to complete predetermined tasks or projects. But when the manager cannot find the time to be involved in the team's execution of its duties, the ability to create an atmosphere of effective teamwork is threatened.

**Big Egos:** Who hasn't worked with someone at one point or another that has a big ego? – Yes, we all have been there. It can be the worst! Teams that contain members who are not working for the general benefit of the group will have a difficult time developing into an effective unit. Individual staff members are assigned roles within a team, but if the staff members feel that they can take on other roles and interfere with the work of their teammates, then the group dynamic is threatened. Team members need to keep their egos in check and work on their assigned tasks to help develop an effective team.<sup>1</sup>



## The Elements of Effective Teamwork

Teamwork is as much a science as it is an art; some teams work extremely well together, while others seem to fall apart or actually hinder progress. Knowing the elements for effective teamwork can help you to build and maintain high-performance teams throughout your organization. Some of these elements you want to maintain at your workplace include team goals, communication and risk management, focus and responsibilities, and involvement and trust.



**Team Goals:** One of the first steps in building an effective team is to define the goals of the project. In construction, this can involve a preconstruction meeting or a kick-off meeting. Everyone should agree on the objectives, starting with safety which will lead to staying within the budget. Goals should be measurable and specific. To make perfect goals, start with the K.I.S.S (Keep It Simple Stupid) method. Simple, measurable goals make it easy for everyone to understand what is expected of them. For example, when setting the project schedule everyone should agree on goals such as providing fast replies to requests for information so the builder does not lose any time.

**Communication and Risk Management:** Because team members are interdependent, they must be constantly communicating, sharing information, giving warnings, reinforcing safe behavior, and talking up safety. At the beginning of the project, team members should decide what risks there are and distribute responsibility for managing those risks. For example, a shortage of labor may cause expensive project delays, a failed building inspection can require expensive alterations and injuries on the work site can delay work and add costs.

**Focus and Responsibilities:** Effective teams are focused on the same safety mission – identifying hazards, working safely, and preventing accidents. When working as a team, each member has different duties and responsibilities. To function and focus effectively, team members must understand these, as well as the duties and responsibilities of the other team members. At the beginning of the project, coordinate responsibilities among team members. Knowing their own responsibilities as well as their teammate's lowers the risk of confusion, injury, and lost time.

**Involvement and Trust:** When teams are successful, it's because employees all over the workplace are involved in safety programs and in efforts to improve workplace safety. Members cooperate with one another and depend on each other to identify hazards, follow safety procedures, and prevent accidents. One key to working effectively as a team is for team members to respect and trust each other. In construction, people from different professions, such as contracting and architecture, must cooperate closely and it may be difficult for people to understand each other's approaches to a problem. Members of the construction team should spend time getting to know each other, learning a bit about what work they each do. This can help team members trust that the other people on the team know their jobs well and can accomplish what they set out to do.<sup>2</sup>

## Making Fanatics out of Your Team Members

Now that we've discussed what hinders teamwork and some important elements of a team, let's look at how to make fanatics out of your team members!

In the same way that sports fans become loyal to their favorite team, you can foster team spirit in your business by creating a team corporate culture. People like to belong. Addressing employees as part of the team and making sure that wall posters, internal company slogans and memos promote the team as a whole will help instill team spirit in workers.

There are ways to make teamwork fun! Choosing colors from your company logo and making them the team colors can continue team culture efforts. Foster teamwork by giving away T-shirts that have the logo printed on them. Providing employees a uniform makes it much easier to identify with each other as teammates rather than coworkers or colleagues. Hold contests that require employees to work together to win prizes to further cement their working relationship.

It's important to set daily, weekly, and quarterly goals for teams to meet. Some good-natured competition to see who can produce the most products, sell the most policies, or have the most meetings gives employees a reason to work together. It also helps boost your bottom line as productivity picks up in their effort to win. Offer a fun prize for the winning team and remember to give a smaller but fun consolation prize to the losing team.

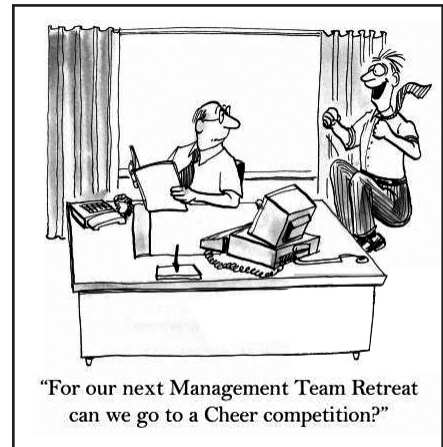
It is also important to cut your losses. A disgruntled employee can act like a cancer, eating away at company morale from the inside out. If you discover an employee who is unhappy or shows disregard towards safety practices, try to provide solutions so that the situation is resolved. If this doesn't fix the problem, consider terminating their employment and replacing them with someone ready to work hard, demonstrate safety, and be part of the team.<sup>3</sup>

## Group Think

Group Think is a major product of an unhealthy team culture. When team members begin to lose their voices and conform to the group, poor decisions can be made.

A team is only as strong as the sum of its parts, so every individual voice needs to be heard so that input can be used to make better decisions. If a team takes on one voice, and makes decisions using a group think mentality, they are going to fail. In order to stop group think you need to eliminate the over powering voices in the team using group problem solving. If every member of the team is required to provide input on a decision, it is much easier to come to a rational, thought out conclusion that will benefit the team and help it achieve its goals.

At Wolgast we use the safety team to help combat Group Think. One thing in particular that is really beneficial to our Wolgast team is our weekly "Tool Box Talks" that are held. These meetings provide an open forum for selected individuals to voice their opinions and concerns regarding job site safety. We use these meetings as a tool to promote new, safe ideas and practices to allow our workers to perform better, and safer.



## The Human Side of Safety

Culturally, construction remains an industry where workers may feel that taking risks is a part of the job. Some workers may even worry about what their peers will think of them if they take extra safety precautions. Changing this attitude is critical to creating a culture that embraces the benefits of safe work practices.

Although compliance with federal, state and local rules and regulations remains the key concern, the construction industry is starting to see a shift from strictly compliance-driven safety programs to those that emphasize the “human side” of safety and stress the health and welfare of workers.

This personal-based safety ideology follows the premise that if employees are reminded, on a daily basis, of the impact that an injury can have on their home life, personal relationships, and co-workers, they will be more likely to work safely and avoid risks that could result in accidents.

Building a safer workplace requires constant effort and continual improvement, but the result is well worth the investment of time, resources and money. A proactive safety culture helps to save lives, retain workers, reduce claims and delays, and enhance productivity and profitability while strengthening the company’s reputation.<sup>4</sup>

Teamwork is a vital component to building a safer workplace.

Studies have shown that the effectiveness of a team increases with the social familiarity of the team members. The more you know and like someone, the more able you are to trust and count on them. You get to know their skills, capabilities, and weaknesses, as they get to know yours.

This is why teamwork is especially important when it comes to job site safety. One individual may be able to reach higher, or lift more; another may be more knowledgeable on the use of power equipment. The key to working as a team is to offset your weaknesses with other’s strengths. Whatever these differences may be, compatible individuals will invariably find ways to work together that are mutually beneficial.

Teamwork has many benefits. Physically helping each other fairly distributes the workload, increases productivity, boosts morale, and reduces the risk of injury.



## The Team Approach to Safety

At Wolgast Restoration we feel that the best way to approach safety is through a team effort. Our safety teams start in the office and end in the field. The only way to ensure that work sites are safe is to make sure everyone works as a team.

Our safety program starts with Senior Management, and ends with job site employees. There are also many members in between that all work together to ensure the safety of our job sites.

The members of our team are:

- Senior Management
- Safety Director
- Safety Team
- Job Site Supervisors
- Project Managers & Estimators
- And Job Site Employees

**The Senior Management Staff:** Safety initiatives should start with the Senior Management staff. Senior management must regard worker safety as a core company value and they should take an active role in all areas of the Safety Program.

The key responsibilities for senior management include:

- Developing a clearly defined safety program that every employee can be trained to follow.
- Creating a budget of time and resources to make sure employees receive quality training and information on how to work as a team safely.
- Assigning safety responsibility and accountability to all employees.
- Positively rewarding those employees who go above and beyond to work safely.
- Ensuring that any sub contractors have the same standards for safe working conditions that are expected of our employees.
- Providing all employees with the right Personal Protection Equipment, Up to date OSHA guides, and Emergency services contacts.

Senior management sets the standards for safe working without even stepping foot on the job site. If they provide the right tools for safe working conditions and instill a team first safety attitude, the other pieces will fall into place.

**The Safety Director:** The Safety Director administers the day-to-day operation of the Safety Program. For us the Safety Director acts as the eyes and ears of Senior Management. They administer the safety policies that Senior Management puts into place and make sure that everyone else following them. The safety director monitors the overall safety program for changes that may need to be made to maintain a safe job site. Another key thing that the safety director does is, choose the Safety Team members and coordinate the meetings.

**The Safety Team:** The Safety Team is elected to aid and inform top management on worker safety issues. The Safety Team is generally composed of the Safety Director and representatives from project management, field supervision, restoration, and tradesmen. The members are chosen for their attention to detail and safe working habits. The Safety Team helps implement the Safety Program and acts in a leadership role to encourage employee participation. The Team's practical work experience and its close relationship with the employees is vital in obtaining the participation and cooperation of all personnel.

The key responsibilities of the Safety Team are to:

- Attend safety meetings called "Tool Box Talks"
- Assist the Safety Director to create rules and best practices for reaching safety goals.
- Assist in planning and conducting safety training seminars.
- Act as a role model for other employees.
- Recommend safety procedures for new and existing tools, equipment and work methods.

**Supervisors:** Supervisors are the key personnel in project site safety. It is their responsibility to maintain the safest possible project site by applying and enforcing the safety rules and work practices.

Their key responsibilities are to:

- Work hard to obtain safety compliance from all employees.
- Plan for safety as well as emergency situations at all times. Accidents happen, so it's always important to be ready to act when one takes place.
- Work with the rest of the team to perform safety inspections throughout the duration of the job. This will also encourage employees to stick closely to the safety plans given to them.
- Conduct weekly field employee safety training. Safety should be a constant theme, and so should safety training. You can't teach someone to be TOO safe on a job site.
- Ensure employees possess and properly use Personal Protection Equipment and special safety equipment.

Supervisors have a huge responsibility when it comes to sub contractors in that they need to make them aware that safety is a core value of the company.

The Supervisors play a key role in the team when it comes to safety. They are the boots on the ground when it comes to job site safety.

**Project Managers and Estimators:** The Project Managers and Estimators are vital to the success of the Safety Program. Because their responsibilities begin before anyone else's, they are the front line of safety implementation and accident prevention. They are required to plan safety into every project. They must ensure that the supervisors have the time and funding to install safety devices or procedures on each project.

Their key responsibilities are to:

- Know the safety regulations, the Safety Program, and safe work practices.
- Plan for project safety by developing cost and time budgets that ensure all safety rules and safe work practices may be followed and safety equipment obtained.

- Consider safety a priority when selecting and/or qualifying subcontractors.
- Conduct general safety inspections when present at a project site and immediately report any known unsafe conditions to the job supervisor for corrective action.

**Employees:** The primary goal of the Safety Program is to protect employees from injury or health threats. To accomplish this, it is necessary for the employees to be proactively involved in the Safety Program and work as a team to achieve the overall safety goals and objectives.

Employee's key responsibilities include:

- Reading and understanding the Safety and Health
- Complying with all the rules of the Safety Program, the safety standards, the job safety rules, and special safety rules set down by supervisors.
- Alerting co-workers of immediate or potential hazards on the job site.
- Correcting and/or reporting all hazardous conditions immediately
- Reporting all accidents and near misses, no matter how minor
- Attending all off-site and on-site safety training and general safety meetings,
- Maintaining a safe and satisfactory driving record when work includes driving duties.
- Directing questions, suggestions, or concerns about safety to the supervisor or Safety Director.

## Safety Incentive/Reward Program

Putting sound policies in place is only one step in a successful safety program. To ensure that employees follow them, a Safety Incentive/Reward Program should be implemented. This approach can be more effective than simply penalizing employees for workplace accidents.

Aggressive safety goals that are reasonable and attainable should be established yearly. These goals are the standard for which safe behavior will be recognized.

The Incentive/Reward criteria should go beyond policy and procedure compliance and include safe behavior and safety contributions. This creates a more proactive approach to safe work practices.

A properly designed Incentive/Reward Program can improve teamwork and create healthy competition among co-workers.

Accountability must also be a core component of the safety culture. Everyone, including management, needs to be held accountable for safety. Without accountability, employees may be tempted to cut corners in an effort to meet the Safety Incentive/Reward criteria.

When it comes to meeting safety goals, companies should always recognize success. Recognition shows workers that management values safety and the contribution it makes to the success of a project and the company.





## In Conclusion

To keep safe teamwork alive and well in the workplace, it is important to consider these fundamentals:

**Make Safety a Priority:** Talk about it every day and hold weekly safety meetings to discuss new information, problems, and solutions.

**Keep the Workers Informed:** Make sure employees are up to date on any changes in policies, procedures, materials, hazards, and so on. Ignorance inhibits safe practices.

**Provide Excellent Training:** Demonstrate, discuss, practice, and review safety. Frequent drills, skill building exercises, and knowledge transfer will mold a team into a tight-knit unit.

**Select the Right Equipment:** This includes both equipment like tools and machines, as well as required personal protection equipment. Make sure employees know how to use equipment properly, and follow up to make sure they do. Just like there is a tool for every job, there is an operator for every tool. Make sure everyone not only has the right equipment but that the right person is using it.

**Emphasize Employee Participation:** Get employees involved in hazard detection, problem solving, and decision making. Everybody has something to contribute to a safer workplace.

**Encourage Suggestions:** Employees know a lot about their jobs, and if you've trained them well, they know a lot about safety, too. Listen to their ideas for making the workplace safer.

**And lastly... Reinforce Safe Behavior:** Give positive feedback for safe performance, and use feedback to correct unsafe behavior and redirect risk taking, as well.<sup>5</sup>

### Article Sources:

<sup>1</sup> George N. Root III, Demand Media; *Exampes of Barriers to Effective Teamwork*; The Houston Chronicle.

<sup>2</sup> David Ingram, Demand Media; *Exampes of Barriers to Effective Teamwork*; The Houston Chronicle.

<sup>3</sup> Candace Webb, Demand Media; *What Is the Most Effective Way to Foster Teamwork?*; The Houston Chronicle.

<sup>4</sup> George Cesarini, Geoffrey Hall and Mathew Kupiec; *Bulding a Proactive Safety Culture in the Construction Industry*; [www.acegroup.com/us](http://www.acegroup.com/us).

<sup>5</sup> C. Kilbourne; *It Takes Teamwork to Prevent Workplace Accidents*; [www.safetydailyadvisor.com](http://www.safetydailyadvisor.com).



1494 N. Graham Road • Freeland, MI 48623  
Office: (989) 781-0173  
4141 Davis Creek Court • Kalamazoo, MI 49001  
Office: (269) 585-4220  
[www.wolgastrestoration.com](http://www.wolgastrestoration.com)