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How a Safer Workplace Can Lead to Happier Employees

Stop thinking of safety as an obligation. The rewards are greater than you think.



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Sure, employee pay is an important motivator. But it is not the only way to send a positive message about how you regard your workers. Safety is vitally important--and not just to keep your plant running and your insurance costs in check.

In helping build the culture we want at Marlin Steel, it's meaningful for an employee to think, "My boss wants me to come home with all my fingers tonight. He's not risking my well-being to cut corners and save a penny." We're delighted that we just passed 1,500 straight days without an accident at our plant in Baltimore. We update the count on a big, green "Safety Begins Here" sign just outside the production floor--both as a daily reminder of the need for caution and as a source of pride.

Some of my employees have worked in other factories where they practically wave the garlic and cross when they see agents coming from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. I'd rather take advantage of the OSHA agents' knowledge. We're experts in building material-handling containers from steel wire and sheet metal; we're not experts in safety. The OSHA folks are. Their suggestions have contributed to our safety streak and helped us build a more efficient operation.

When I first met with them years ago, I asked who had the best safety program in our area. They led me to an executive named Neill Christopher who ran operations at a window factory near Baltimore. I

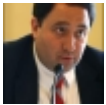
figured any exemplar of safety in a factory full of glass, sheet metal, band saws and welding machines must know his stuff. When I met with Neill, he told me that when he first suggested OSHA consultation to his bosses at Acadia Windows & Doors, they asked him somewhat warily if that was like having the fox guard the henhouse? No, it was more like having the fox collect the eggs, he told them. That answer probably didn't put them at ease, but his results are clear: more than 2,200 consecutive days without a lost-time accident.

One of Neill's best suggestions was to set up a safety committee of employees, where they're empowered to direct change. Instead of grumbling about mandates from management, employees view suggestions with greater credibility because they're coming from their peers. And, frankly, the suggestions are often better because the folks in the trenches are more aware than management is of shop floor safety challenges.

Setting up an employee safety committee would be a hollow exercise without a commitment to apply its suggestions. And follow-through doesn't come cheap. Devoting your good people for several hours a month to work on safety challenges rather than on production is one cost. Bringing older equipment to current standards can also be expensive.

But it's not always a case of throwing money at a fix: Great ideas may cost very little. Neill told me the story about hiring a highly recommended applicant who was blind. After she was there a while, the factory layout was changed, impeding her ability to locate the exit as easily. Relocating her work station wasn't an option. Then someone suggested added a coarser finish to the floor to help her recognize a turn to exit the factory. For just a few bucks, problem solved. It was a good reminder: working safer and working smarter go hand in hand.

<http://www.inc.com/drew-greenblatt/safer-workplace-can-lead-to-happier-employees.html>



***Drew Greenblatt** is the president of **Marlin Steel**, a U.S.-based manufacturer of wire baskets and sheet-metal fabrications. Marlin has grown 25% over the past three years and has a record of 1,422 days without a safety problem.*

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