Enhancing the Bottom Line Through Safety
By Randy Conley

Safety first is becoming the new mantra of the construction industry. Rather than regarding safety programs as a necessary burden, companies need to embrace the concept of a “zero accident” workplace and nourish efforts to achieve that goal.

A well planned safety program and integrated safety structure will result in improved safety, enhanced productivity and increased employee morale. Other bottom line benefits also will accrue as a result of a zero accident workplace. It is common knowledge that the total cost of an accident is more than the direct cost of worker’s compensation claims, medical treatment costs and higher insurance premiums. The impact of indirect or “soft” costs can be many times the direct costs. If an accident is serious enough, access to the job site will have to be secured for medical personnel, OSHA, or even the police, disrupting the work-flow, and taking the remaining workers’ attention off their jobs. Even in the case of a minor injury, the injured worker will have to be replaced or his or her activity restricted, the accident will need to be investigated, appropriate actions taken and, of course, insurance claims filed. Given the low profit margins in the construction industry, this productivity loss can significantly affect the bottom line.

How then does one go about implementing an effective, company-wide safety program, instilling in the entire company a culture of safety? Here are a few tips:

Get Everyone Involved

In order to create an organization that values safety first, it is important to actively involve employees on every level. Giving those who have the most exposure to workplace place hazards a chance to comment on job site safety and make suggestions on how it can be improved, increases their awareness of potentially dangerous work situations, and empowers them to think safety at all times. More often than not it also instills in them a sense of responsibility for the safety of everyone on the work site, especially when they see their feedback is acted upon or recognized.

Managers are key to the safety mission because they set the tone for how the entire workforce responds. If senior management pays lip service to safety planning, implementation, and communication of safety measures, then the program will not be
taken seriously. If safety is considered a key company priority, then field personnel will follow their managers’ lead.

At University Marelich Mechanical (UMMI), safety performance is a byproduct of our “Changing the Way We Work” program, where improved safety and productivity are achieved through an understanding that accidents result from the way work is performed. When we successfully change the way that we work (task by task, workplace by workplace), we identify the new standard as Good2Go!

To be Good2Go! both safety enhancement and efficiency improvement are emphasized with a focus on innovation and a review of the processes, products, equipment and tools that make tasks easier and safer to complete. Risk management methodologies are integrated into all such reviews; reduced risk is a natural outcome of these efforts.

*Establish a Safety and Productivity Committee*

A safety and productivity committee can develop and help track organizational loss reduction goals, objectives, and responsibilities. University Marelich Mechanical’s committee is engaged in a strategic planning process to systematically Change The Way We Work in order meet our goals. The strategic plan implementation is tied to successful project execution and monitored throughout the project curve. Robust hazard prevention and control processes are coupled with worksite analysis, training and education of the benefits of improving the way we work. This approach has proven to enhance the bottom line through reduction in loss, higher productivity, and increased morale.

*Plan Ahead*

It is important to use the pre-project planning phase to identify the most hazardous activities that can be expected on a specific site. Using data (such as lessons learned, near miss accidents, BIM information, etc.) from previous jobs helps to pinpoint potential areas that will benefit from safety enhancements. It is important that potential areas of improvement are fully communicated to the responsible managers, leaders, and the affected workers.

While pre-planning is crucial, it is equally important to continue to monitor the situation during construction. A safety plan must remain flexible enough to adjust job
processes in line with long-term safety goals, without sacrificing the successful on-time and on-budget completion of the project.

*Communicate--Communicate--Communicate*

Safety and productivity goals should be communicated continuously and consistently. One way of doing this is to employ established hazard analysis tools like a JHA/JSA (Job Hazard/Safety Analysis), or a STA (Safe Task Analysis). University Marelich Mechanical’s STA has the standard hazard prompts and controls, but also included in this tool is a post-task questionnaire which asks: “What problems did you have with today’s work assignment? What can we do tomorrow to improve safety/performance?” Responses are addressed by the supervisor and forwarded to the safety director/committee for review. It is imperative that all comments receive a response so that the credibility of the program is maintained.

University Marelich Mechanical’s “Spot the Trap” and “Spot the Opportunity” program is an inclusive communication tool used to promote participation and personal involvement. Employees have the opportunity to inform, comment and suggest jobsite safety items that need to be addressed or new processes or tools that might enhance safety and productivity. All comments are reviewed and suggestions with merit get published in a monthly “Safety and Quality Newsletter” after the safety committee reviews and discusses the issues, solutions, or suggestions. Every card gets a personalized response from the safety manager, containing the outcome and comments along with a safety incentive item.

*Provide Safety and Productivity Education*

There is a constant flow of innovative time saving products, from the equipment and materials being installed to the cordless hand tools used to install them. Tool manufacturers have really stepped up with powerful, ergonomic, lightweight tools; they also provide training demonstrations. Pre-fabrication and assembly reduces overhead or “on your knees” work where fatigue becomes a factor with the workforce. It is important to seek out and try to innovate; it may not work out every time, when it does it pays off.

It also makes sense to address off-work accidents in company wide training activities and encourage workers to share what they’ve learned at work with their
families. We do this through our “Be There For Life” Zero Accident Program which links work place behavior with important life events.

Through efforts to change the way we work and become “Good2Go!” University Marelich Mechanical has gone without an OSHA recordable incident for almost two years in a row. But most importantly, these programs have helped our employees return home safely to their families at the end of each work day.

In summary, to be effective a safety program must be multifaceted, fluid, and adaptable to the changing conditions – and still be consistent in its approach. It is the sum of everyone involved and everything we do to support a work place culture that embraces safety as the outcome of the way we work.

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