

Building a Culture of Safety on Construction Sites

Ideas for establishing a 'want to' instead of 'have to' safety program.



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Multi-tasking has evolved from a talent to a necessity to keep up with the pace of everyday productivity. Whether an employee is talking on a cell phone while working, or not wearing his/her personal protective equipment, many employees have placed themselves and other at needless risk to save time or be more comfortable. The bottom line is that the majority of accidents are *not* due to a lack of training, skill or knowledge—nearly all accidents are simply related to poor decision-making. This comprehensive look at building a culture of safety will examine the philosophy, accountability and structure needed to develop a successful construction safety program.

Personal Terms

Think back to the person who taught you the first safety rule; possibly your mother giving you a warning about a hot stove (Hot, don't touch!). When most people are pushed into a decision, they are more likely to rebel against it, until they truly understand the rationale and risk behind the decision. The "it could never happen to me" attitude fills up emergency rooms throughout the United States on a daily basis with serious injuries, many of them life threatening.

Sadly, carelessness in the work place and the pressure to produce tend to go hand-in-hand and, in some cases, are rewarded. Too often, it is easier for a foreman to turn a blind eye and cross his or her fingers when observing a safety rule being violated, than to slow down the process with enforcement, follow through and responsibility.

Time, effort, comfort and peer pressure are the foremost reasons employees commit unsafe acts when they *know* better, but don't *do* better. Many employees don't like being required to attend safety training sessions, or in some cases, obey safety rules. Many construction companies establish safety as a top priority, but send mixed messages when something more important bumps safety to the back burner. Employee safety should be a value and a lifestyle with a 24/7 approach.

Accountability for Actions

The superintendent, foreman and lack of company training efforts are ultimately responsible for sustaining a culture that "permits" unsafe behavior. If there is no consequence for violating company safety rules, no way to enforce the safety program, and no program to point to any bottom-line accountability, a major change in the existing program needs to be implemented. Specifically, there are three key pillars of an effective construction safety program:

1. Commitment from senior management.
2. Active implementation of a formal safety program led by mid-management (i.e., foreman or superintendent).
3. Employee involvement and practice through example and demonstration, not directives.

It's not enough to make safety a priority. Safety must become an inherent company value because priorities always change, and such a commitment always begins at the top. All individuals want to succeed, best echoed by the old saying: "What interests my boss, fascinates me."

The term “accountability” typically tags along with a negative connotation of punitive or disciplinary action. In a compliance context, this word translates to everyone owning responsibility for individual safety. There are three types of accountability...

1. Personal accountability.
2. Peer accountability.
3. Management accountability.

Liabilities

While conventional wisdom says employees criticize companies that impose strong disciplinary actions toward safety measures, the opposite is usually the case. Construction companies with a high regard for safety demonstrate a greater level of care and concern for employee well-being. When safety standards break down, serious injuries or even fatalities can occur, leaving families shattered due to carelessness and irresponsibility. Some of the most hazardous issues include:

- Falls
- Struck or Caught by
- Electrical

While slips, trips and strains may happen, fatalities and serious injuries are real and typically related to one of the three areas above. For example, what would happen if there were no police to monitor traffic on the roads? You’d have a recipe for disaster. The same principle holds true with safety measures on a construction site. Cost and productivity correlate directly with companies who demonstrate a strong baseline safety program led by frontline supervision and employee participation. Safety becomes part of the job — it’s universal.

Zero Tolerance

Companies need to have highly detailed safety procedures in place, ensure and account for employee training and awareness, and ultimately a zero-tolerance policy for any violations. Employers must create a system of accountability that includes:

- Thorough training
- Strong policy
- Documentation
- Accountability to follow through with safety rules

To look at it another way, many construction companies may terminate an employee due to excessive tardiness or theft, while overlooking a serious breach in safety rules. Yet safety deals directly with physical well-being, including guarding against serious injury or fatal accidents. Therefore, employers need to address the issue of safety both severely and consistently. Confrontation may be unpleasant, but an employee may never get a second chance to do his or her job safely if proper compliance measures are not taken seriously.

10 Words for Safety

Safety is about creating an environment where employees *want* to be safe because it's the right thing to do. A safety awareness snapshot illustrating FDRSafety's "10 words for safety" seminar concept, is illustrated below.

**Time
Comfort**

**Safety
Have to
Want to
Accountability**

**Value
Family**

To bring the concepts into the context of construction operations, consider the following question: "*What are the top three most important things in life?*" employees commonly answer in the following manner:

1. Family
2. Faith
3. Health

"If someone were to say that he/she would hurt a member of your family, what would you do?" Most people would do anything in their power to stop that from happening.

Safety values, whether at work or at home, have the power to protect or ruin your family, faith and health. If an unsafe action were to undermine any one of these values, would shaving off a few extra minutes by not putting on protective equipment or skipping steps through a safety procedure still seem as important in its possible consequence? Safety shouldn't be a 'have to' it should be a 'want to.'

Preparing an Effective Safety Program

FDRSafety's recommendations for establishing a successful safety initiative are listed below.

Action items for top management

- Safety begins first with top management: focus on visual concepts, not just words.
- Create a program that makes sense to management *and* workers.
- Identify where issues exist and implement a program that serves best.
- Fully understand the responsibility and requirement to wear personal protective equipment.

Encouraging a culture of safety

- Encourage employee involvement and feedback.
- Develop a safety committee with the authority to create and implement changes.
- Select an employee from the workforce to function as a full-time safety coordinator with the responsibility of making safety changes *without* disciplinary authority.

Safe and Efficient

While the construction industry has progressed dramatically in increased productivity and quality, the on-site injuries are more prevalent, especially in the media. FDRSafety encourages a holistic approach to safety on construction sites. We believe a construction worksite can have quality work, be productive, and have an effective safety program at the same time.

[James W. Stanley](#) joined FDRsafety, LLC, in March 2004 as President. He joined AK Steel in 1996 as Vice President of Safety and Health after serving the U.S. Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) for nearly 25 years. He joined OSHA in

1971 as a maritime safety officer in the Philadelphia area office. In 1973 he was named supervisory safety and health specialist for the Pittsburgh office. In 1987 he was named regional administrator for the New York office and, in 1994, Mr. Stanley was appointed Deputy Assistant Secretary for OSHA in Washington, D.C. Mr. Stanley has served on the National Safety Council's Board of Directors as well as the National Safety Council's Executive Committee as Chairman of the Trustees. He is a member of the Association of Iron and Steel Engineers (AIST), where he serves as Chairman on the AIST Safety & Health Committee. He is also an advisor to the Board of Trustees for SHIELD (Safety and Health for Industrial Education and Labor Development). On January 2, 2003 the US Secretary of Labor, Elaine L. Chao appointed Mr. Stanley to the National Advisory Committee on Occupational Safety and Health (NACOSH). This 12-person committee advises the Secretaries of Labor and Health and Human Services, on occupational safety and health programs. Mr. Stanley holds a Bachelor of Science degree in business administration from Elizabethtown College.