



Building a Proactive Safety Culture  
in the Construction Industry

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## Project planners should also work with their insurers to determine the most effective risk management strategies before a project begins and while it's being built.

In a high-hazard industry like construction, safety is an investment that provides real benefits. A safe work environment helps to keep skilled employees on the job and projects on track by reducing accidents that result in injuries and schedule delays, while also reducing the risks of litigation and regulatory action. A strong safety record enhances a company's reputation, makes it more competitive and helps to manage insurance costs over time. Fostering a successful safety culture, however, is a company-wide effort that requires commitment and participation from the chief executive to project managers, superintendents, foremen and individual workers on the job site. That commitment should extend to the selection of subcontractors who also embrace a strong safety ethic, particularly when a company is using a construction wrap-up insurance program.

As any builder knows, projects start well before ground is broken. Safety should be part of the process right from the very beginning. In working toward establishing a safer workplace, construction companies can tap the extensive knowledge of risk management experts who are well versed in their industry. Project planners should also work with their insurers to determine the most effective risk management strategies before a project begins and while it's being built. Once a project starts, safety should be a part of every employee's job, every day.

In its effort to improve job-site safety, the construction industry faces some headwinds from economic pressures and long-standing cultural issues. In a sluggish economy, competition to win projects has intensified, putting pressure on pricing and increasing the pressure to get jobs done quickly. But trying to cut costs

by cutting corners with safety is a false saving, as one accident can far outweigh all of the perceived savings.

### **Building a safer workplace**

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Despite risk control improvements, construction remains a dangerous business, accounting for the second most fatal work injuries of any sector after transportation and warehousing, which have the most fatalities. Although the number of fatalities in the industry has fallen sharply in recent years, so has employment. There were 721 fatal work injuries in the private construction industry in 2011, down nearly 42 percent since 2006.<sup>1</sup> The decline in fatal injuries, however, comes as employment in construction has fallen by more than 27 percent from its pre-crisis high. More than two million fewer people were employed in construction at year-end 2011 than in April 2006 when employment hit a seasonally adjusted peak of 7.7 million.<sup>2</sup> The high number of fatalities that continue to plague the industry is a stark reminder that more needs to be done. Construction represents about five percent of the private sector workforce but accounts for nearly 16 percent of the fatal injuries.<sup>3</sup>

In its effort to improve job-site safety, the construction industry faces some headwinds from economic pressures and long-standing cultural issues. In a sluggish economy, competition to win projects has intensified, putting pressure on pricing and increasing the pressure to get jobs done quickly. But trying to cut costs by cutting corners with safety is a false saving, as one accident can far outweigh all of the perceived savings.

Culturally, construction remains an industry where workers may feel that

taking risks is a part of the job and may worry about what their peers think of those who take extra precautions. The reality is that construction workers are more exposed to workplace injuries because of the inherent dangers of a job that often involves working with large machinery and power tools, often many floors above the ground.

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.<sup>4</sup> By focusing on eliminating dangers at the construction sites through an approach that personalizes safety and health, construction executives can embrace and promote a safety philosophy throughout their organization. This approach modifies the traditional enforcement mentality, which immediately threatens employees who violate standard safety rules with disciplinary action.

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 and personal relationships they will be more likely to work safely and avoid risks that could result in accidents.<sup>5</sup>

Building a safer workplace and industry, requires constant effort and continual improvement, but the result is well worth the investment of time, resources and money. Today more construction companies are retaining a larger portion of the risk through higher deductibles, and can expect to bear significant costs for any accident involving bodily injury.<sup>6</sup> Delays resulting from accidents will also prove expensive. To be competitive, companies need to control all costs,

including insurance. Safer companies tend to be more appealing to potential clients and to insurers. 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.

### **Here are 12 steps that construction companies can take to help make the job site safer, keep projects on track and manage insurance costs.**

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#### **Start at the top**

Safety on the job site starts in the executive suite. To have a real impact on workers, safety has to become a core value of the organization. Chief executives should instill the idea in every level of management that the responsibility for safety lies with them. Too often it is shunted off to the on-site safety manager or corporate safety director. Project executives and managers, superintendents and foremen should be required to take the necessary training, such as the OSHA 30 hour certification course, and they should be well versed in accident investigation, substance abuse, conflict resolution, pre-job safety planning, loss analysis and managing subcontractors. Senior executives need to lead by example taking an active and visible role in the implementation and execution of the safety culture.

#### **Make safety committees and safety managers a part of the job**

Proactive companies may establish a safety committee composed of upper management, risk managers, safety directors, and operational staff to continually discuss and review safety performance. Ideally, the committee should include labor. By including craft labor who work on site, managers can get a much better idea of how safety

procedures are being implemented and how they can continue to improve safety. Bringing labor into the discussion also reinforces the commitment to safety on a personal level.

Companies often staff larger jobs with on-site safety managers, but they should consider them on smaller projects as well. While it may add costs up front, an on-site safety manager can potentially save hundreds of thousands of dollars in claims. But safety efforts shouldn’t end with the safety manager. The safety manager should be viewed as a resource to help continually review and enhance the efforts made by everyone on site. Every person on a project site is responsible for safety.

#### **Recognize success, but hold everyone accountable**

Accountability must be a core component of the safety culture. From individual workers to foremen, project supervisors and executives, everyone needs to be held accountable for safety. Without accountability, employees may be tempted to cut corners in an effort to save time and money. When safety programs, procedures and safe workplace habits are enforced from the top, field employees take safety seriously. Aggressive safety goals that are reasonable and attainable should be established yearly. Management performance reviews should include those results.

Discipline is only part of the process. Companies also should recognize success such as reaching a certain number of hours worked without an accident or achieving a full year incident rate that meets or exceeds the goal. Recognition shows workers that management values safety and the contribution it makes to the success of a project and the company.



### **Plan safety into the project**

Because every project is built on paper first, safety begins with pre-planning. The means and methods that will be used to build the project should be identified, along with the exposures they will entail. All exposures should be identified and addressed in pre-planning, from excavation to foundation, and superstructure to fit out. Controls to mitigate the exposures must then be identified and incorporated into the safety plan. Successful performed pre-planning allows the project to run unimpeded by minimizing the potential for accidents that can hamper productivity and cause schedule delays. Proactive companies make safety pre-planning an integral part of every project.

Before work starts, a project specific safety plan should be developed to provide an overview of the scope of the work and the names, roles and responsibilities of key personnel. It should include a list of local emergency

responders and medical facilities; emergency procedures and evacuation plans; fall management and retrieval procedures; substance abuse testing and new employee orientation. A project specific safety manual that outlines safety expectations and criteria should be given to each subcontractor. In addition, subcontractors should be required to submit their own project specific safety plan to identify the scope of their work, how the hazards will be mitigated and what measures they will take to provide a safe work environment.

### **Prequalify subcontractors for safety**

Companies routinely pre-qualify subcontractors for experience, qualification and financial strength, but safety history and performance should also be a criteria. To evaluate subcontractor safety performance, companies should review their experience modification rates, their Bureau of labor Statistics recordable and lost time incident rates, OSHA citation record and their overall safety culture and procedures. The pre-qualification of subcontractors should not stop with safety history and performance. It should include a review of the subcontractor's own safety culture and how the company incorporates safety into its day-to-day operation.

General contractors can enforce across-the-board job site safety practices for subcontractors through subcontractor agreements and bid documents. This will ensure that subcontractors are aware of the safety requirements and expectations in advance. Subcontractors are responsible for the safety and health of their employees, but also need to ensure they perform their work in a manner that protects the general public. Failure to select subcontractors that implement a proactive safety culture opens general contractors up to potential liabilities.

### **Train workers for safety**

Safety isn't simply common sense. Workers need to be trained to properly use a variety of safety equipment, such as fall arrest systems, and they need to know the appropriate regulations. Orientation shouldn't be limited to new hires. The company should provide orientation specific to each project. The orientation should include an overview of the project, an in-depth review of the safety requirements and expectations, evacuation plans and procedures, disciplinary actions, substance abuse testing policy and fall management procedures and requirements.

Communicating to a diverse workforce whose primary language may not be English is a serious challenge for the industry, which has a high concentration of immigrant and non-English speaking workers.<sup>7</sup> Where English may not be the commonly understood language, construction firms need to address the issue of effectively communicating safety and job expectations. By way of example, a company with a large number of Spanish-speaking employees may need to provide training in Spanish so that workers can thoroughly understand it. The U.S. Department of Labor cites language barriers in high-risk industries, particularly construction, as an issue in ensuring workplace safety.<sup>8</sup> Across all industries, 69 percent of Hispanic or Latino workers fatally injured in 2011 were born outside the United States, with the largest proportion from Mexico.<sup>9</sup>

### **Focus on fall management**

Falls remain a leading cause of injuries and deaths. About 35 percent of the 721 fatal construction industry accidents in 2011 were due to slips and falls - more than three times that of next highest categories, roadway accidents and being struck by an object or piece of equipment.<sup>10</sup> Simply following OSHA guidelines and

local regulations isn't enough. Different trades have different standards, but they all face the same problem: even a fall from a relatively modest height can result in a serious injury. In 2011, falls accounted for 541 fatal work injuries across all industries. Of those cases where the height was known, 57 percent involved falls of 20 feet or less,<sup>11</sup> and about one in four were from heights of 10 feet or less.<sup>12</sup>

A successful fall management program provides a uniform set of procedures for all workers and is an essential part of project pre-planning. While the regulations may vary, fall prevention measures should start for everyone at heights of six feet at a minimum. Companies should strive to build safety in by addressing fall exposures through engineering controls or alternative work methods. For instance, anchor points can be included in structural members during fabrication. Fall management should be a part of the project pre-planning.<sup>13</sup> If it isn't addressed ahead of time, the chances are that workers' exposures will be greater.

A detailed fall management plan should be developed for each operation where the potential of falls from elevations will be encountered. No operation should commence without an approved fall management plan in place. At a minimum, the plan should address each task where a fall exposure exists; the hazard associated with the task; and the controls that will be implemented to mitigate the exposure and the safety training that will be provided to each worker. The plan should also address retrieval procedures necessary to rescue workers should a fall occur.

### **Combat substance abuse**

In a business that may involve complex equipment and significant heights, companies need to actively combat substance abuse, which remains a widespread problem in construction.

Among 19 major industries, construction had the second highest rate of illicit drug use at 13.7 percent, behind accommodations and food service at 16.9 percent.<sup>14</sup> In light of this fact, companies should focus on preventing impaired personnel from working on a site. Testing may identify workers with substance abuse problems before they endanger others and enable the company to steer them into treatment programs.

Individual workers have a role to play in ensuring their own safety and that of their co-workers. It's crucial to build a culture where fellow workers feel comfortable speaking up if someone is taking chances. It's bad enough if an impaired worker injures himself, worse if he injures other workers and the general public, and worse still if that accident could have been prevented.

### **Evaluate each project phase for safety**

Planning for safety is a continual process. As a project progresses, a job safety task analysis should be performed to make sure that the appropriate work and safety equipment is on hand so that workers aren't tempted to make do with what may be inadequate equipment or take chances that will endanger their safety. The analysis should include the specific aspects of the work at hand, identification of potential exposures, controls to eliminate the exposures and the necessary safety equipment to perform the work properly. The analysis should be submitted by the supervisor before the start of work and reviewed by the project manager or superintendent along with the supervisor. Supervisors should review it with the crew beforehand. All subcontractors should follow this procedure.

### **Make safety an everyday topic**

Weekly toolbox safety talks are a common way to remind workers about safety procedures and to address concerns. But



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safety should be an everyday topic. When foremen gather workers at the beginning of a shift to talk about the day's work, they should review the hazards involved and the safety controls, and make sure that the workers have the right protective gear and that all safety concerns are addressed. If the job changes during the day, construction managers or contractors should review the changes in terms of safety. Weekly meetings with superintendents and subcontractor field management personnel to discuss production-related topics should include a review of any accidents, near misses or safety lapses as well as safety issues related to the coming work.

Regular, planned field safety inspections can help solve a host of issues while also improving safety. Regular inspections are probably the most effective management tool for dealing with the basic root causes of accidents, such as worn equipment, misplaced tools or equipment or unsafe actions by workers.

#### **Review accidents and near misses**

Companies should start with the mindset that accidents are not inevitable. In the event that there is an accident, the facts and circumstances should be reviewed to identify root causes so that corrective action can be taken and future incidents can be prevented. The same attention should be paid to near misses that had the potential to become serious accidents. Regular accident review meetings between field managers and executives send a clear message that safety should be paramount.

To help manage safety, each project executive should be provided detailed loss runs and claim information. Project executives should participate in claims review meetings with insurers to get first-hand information on the claims in their projects. This helps to make sure

the project manager understands the financial implications associated with accidents on the projects as well as the impact on the company's insurance costs.

#### **Work with your insurer and risk management experts**

Proactive companies take a collaborative approach to safety with risk management experts and their insurers at every step of the project. Companies should look to their insurers as a resource with substantive expertise in risk management, engineering protocols and procedures to help make their own safety efforts even more robust. Risk engineers may bring a new set of eyes to a project and can help identify issues that may be overlooked. This may occur because the company is focusing on major hazards and overlooking lesser ones. An insurer can bring insights learned from different industries and different regions of the country. They can identify best practices for projects in different areas and expand on best practices which might be considered.

Regular inspections are probably the most effective management tool for dealing with the basic root causes of accidents, such as worn equipment, misplaced tools or equipment or unsafe actions by workers.

Insurers should be looked on to assess risk in projects and in the company's ongoing operations. To find the right carrier, construction companies should look for insurers with deep expertise in their industry as well as recognized financial strength. As part of an overall program, by working with their insurers, construction companies can save lives, reduce accidents and lower the costs associated with injuries and delays. A strong safety culture helps to manage not only insurance costs but also the expenses a company would have to bear itself.

### **Toward zero injuries**

When a construction company succeeds in building a strong culture of safety, it becomes a core value for every employee. A strong safety culture burnishes the company's reputation, which is one of the most valuable assets for any business, and plays an essential role in its long-term success. A safer company suffers fewer losses, enjoys lower costs, becomes a more competitive bidder and makes it more attractive to potential clients and insurers. But safety is a job that never ends. The construction industry is always adopting new methods, new equipment and new machinery. Safety has to continually adapt to the new ways that workers are performing their jobs. At the end of the day, every company wants every worker to go home safe at night. The ultimate goal should be zero injuries. By partnering with the right insurer, companies can move closer to that goal.

### **About the Authors**

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### **Endnotes**

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