

The Importance of Providing a Safe Worksite

An active construction site can be compared to a mine field, with many unforeseen potential tragedies laced throughout the terrain. All too often these potential tragedies are turned into full blown emergencies where one or more persons have inadvertently encountered disasters.

Each year, injuries alone cost U.S. businesses over \$125 billion (ref. OSHA publication 2056), but these numbers only represent the tip of the iceberg without considering the cost of loss of morale, the cost of either temporarily or permanently replacing injured workers, or the cost of business interruptions amongst others. Since 1970 OSHA (the Occupational Safety and Health Administration) has struck fear into many who have heard the acronym, however, OSHA was not designed to keep Construction Managers and Contractors awake nervously sweating at night, but rather to provide a safe and healthy worksite for American workers. For many other countries OSHA has set the standard for health and safety, however, we who make up the American work force have not arrived. Weekly I find construction workers doing things that make me ask myself “what are they thinking”; a more appropriate question may be “are they thinking about safety at all”. The answer to that question is no, many are not thinking about safety on the job, but rather production and production only. While production is a vital concept to be considered, the project’s safety consciousness must be intertwined with production.

This is the essence of managing risk, accepting that risk is a part of our work and taking the necessary pro-active steps to manage the exposure. By its nature construction work is dangerous, however, rather than navigating a mine field; contractors and construction managers would be better served by taking comprehensive, proactive steps to neutralize the battleground by diffusing the mines. What steps can be taken to recognize these mines and provide a safe worksite? The following is my approach to establishing a safety conscious worksite.

1 Conducting exhaustive worksite safety assessments: These intensive assessments act as the risk manager’s minesweeper by detecting, removing, or neutralizing worksite hazards. These assessments not only eliminate hazards but also allow for the assessor to become familiar with the habits and trends of the workers at the worksite; this vital information will further alleviate common missteps and mistakes that your workforce is likely to make. These assessments will ultimately identify weak areas in the safety programs and allow for pro-active corrective action to be taken.

2. Creating and promulgating a comprehensive Site-Specific Health and Safety plan: Far too many companies have a written safety plan that is what I call a “canned” program; a canned program is a pre-written program that is either purchased online or downloaded from the internet. The problem with this is that it is often not specific to the functions or activities of the purchaser. Another common concern with canned programs is that the purchaser rarely has any concept of what is in the program, thus leaving an under prepared and overexposed work force. Having a program that has been created by an individual or group of individuals that is intimately familiar with your company will allow for a personalized program that is specific to your purpose and function. This will also allow for an easier transfer of information from those who have created the program to those who will live out the program, your work force.

3. Pre-planning for safety: Any good construction estimator has mastered the art of preparing for unexpected construction costs including, but not limited to, specification changes, material availability changes, and unforeseen conditions. However, some all together fail to plan for safety at the job. Basic tasks such as performing job hazard/safety analyses and performing routine worksite safety inspections is a foreign concept to many. Pre-planning for safety can head off many potential problems before they manifest themselves into actual problems; this allows for engineering controls (reducing or eliminating workplace hazards by engineering them out of the process) and work practice controls (minimizing and/or eliminating hazards through pro-active safety minded actions) to be introduced to the worksite.

4. Mandating Jobsite Safety Orientation training for all employees: Jobsite safety orientations are an underused asset that risk managers keep hidden in their tool bag. Mandating safety orientations eliminates the legitimacy of the ignorance defense and heightens the overall safety awareness of your workforce. Safety orientations also allow for two way exchanges of information; this verbal communication allows for question and answer sessions as well as assuring that safety expectations are clearly communicated.

The preceding recommendations are basic in nature and should not replace a thorough safety program at your worksite; however, implementing these simple steps can be the beginning of the establishment of a safe worksite.

Jason Townsell is the Safety Director of Safety Environmental Consulting a full service safety and environmental consulting firm based in Bellflower, Ca.

Jason Townsell CHST, CRIS
Safety Director
Safety Environmental Consulting
jtownsell@s-econsulting.com