

OP-ED: How companies can ensure safety excellence

By: [Mike Salsgiver](#) in [Buildings Bridges and Roads](#) April 19, 2016 4:24 pm



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Throughout the devastating recession, companies were forced to downsize. It would be easy to conclude that safety would be another economic casualty of the Great Recession. But the economy can't be an excuse.

AGC is the association it is today because of our world-class safety programs and the SAIF Corporation's workers' compensation program. For AGC members, safety is not just a priority, but also a core value.

Safety excellence does not have to be intrusive and does not have to be expensive. We have written about safety in the past because it is such an integral part of our industry. Even so, we are finding every day that many companies are still trying to get their "safety legs" under them. After recently traveling to San Antonio for our national convention, during which the Construction Safety Excellence Awards were presented, it felt like the right time to address what the top construction companies – big and small – do to ensure safety excellence.

Commitment

Companies that demonstrate commitment to establishing a culture of safety, do so from the top down. Managers show they are committed by treating safety as a job skill – when investments are made in employees as the company's greatest asset, then safety should be considered no different than other "hard skills" that have the potential to grow the company's wealth. Similar to meeting a budget, submitting thoughtfully constructed bids, and following a construction

schedule, safety must be embedded as a normal function of business. And the boss has to be in the lead.

Integrity

Companies that say what they do and do what they say demonstrate integrity. If a safety program does not have integrity, the likelihood that it will succeed and achieve demonstrative change is very slim. Companies must believe in what they are doing and the programs they are implementing in order to experience success. Employees will know from the beginning if company safety programs are real. If the company is serious and practicing what it preaches, employees will get in line and practice safe behavior in the workplace.

Innovation

In line with establishing a safety program with integrity, companies must also recognize the need to constantly innovate and improve their programs. Safety programs must fit the need to the function. This means that programs and ideas will vary from company to company, but when they meet individual companies' specific needs and achieve their goals, they will ultimately endure. Achieving safety excellence requires constant review of and improvement upon ideas, procedures and practices as needed. In doing so, companies often find more effective and less expensive ways of conducting a safe workplace. These concepts can, in turn, migrate to other departments within the company and improve productivity, efficiency, and even employee satisfaction. That sounds like a win for employees and a win for the bottom line!

Empowerment

As mentioned earlier, it is critical that strong safety performance is prioritized highly throughout a company. In doing so, owners, managers and employees alike are engaged in the process and will be empowered to act, if need be. An empowered safety culture recognizes that everyone within the company has a voice and can take action to stop work if a perceived hazard exists. Additionally, establishing a random recognition program that thanks employees for their work or addressing a potential issue has proven incredibly influential and inspires other employees to follow suit.

Passion

Overall, a company that has energy and regularly deliberates on how to improve its culture of safety demonstrates true passion. Whether a company is large or small, the drive to push forward and improve the lives of employees and the bottom line demonstrates that company truly believes in a safety culture.

But what is a safety culture and how does a company achieve it? Ultimately, a company has to act; words need to turn into actions. Companies can ensure a culture of safety when it becomes a natural and normal part of what employees do on a daily basis.

In an effort to drive home the need for strong safety performance, some advocates have tried to highlight the bottom line costs and savings to a company. There is no question that safety can be monetized, both directly and indirectly. Direct safety costs come from an accident, such as the medical bills of an injured worker or broken equipment that requires repair. Indirect safety costs are the peripheral ones associated with an accident, such as increased insurance costs and project delays.

When employees leave their workplace in good health and under safe conditions, workers' compensation and insurance costs are reduced. Simultaneously, productivity improves when employees know they are performing in a safe environment under the supervision of caring management, and the positive perceptions created about the value of workplace safety can yield positive outcomes for bid opportunities and new industry partnerships.

Especially as our industry emerges from tough economic times, there is a new opportunity to refocus on the value of safety and instill the culture of safety within a company. We can only hope that with enough education and repetition of the traits of a "safety excellent" company, the industry can make safety the new normal and continue to engage in the safety dialogue.

And while reduced MOD rates, retro payments, dividend payments, and other monetary benefits highlight the question, ultimately there are only two real reasons to practice safety excellence: because we want to send our team members home safely to their families every night, and because it is the right thing to do.

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