

CREATING SAFE WORKPLACES: BUILDING AN EFFECTIVE PROGRAM

By Melanie Franner, Staff Writer, DEL Communications Inc.

Executive Summary

Workplace safety programs come in all shapes and sizes. But regardless of what they may look like, they are an essential component that is part and parcel of the cost of doing business. Developing a workplace safety program doesn't have to be a labourous and arduous process. Companies can start out on the journey through a series

of small, attainable steps. But it has to be a journey where everyone is on board – from top-level management to the guys out in the field. The journey itself will be an enlightening one – made easier by tapping into the wealth of resources already available.

The good news is that Saskatchewan workplaces are getting safer: statistics from WorkSafe Saskatchewan show that the provincial time-loss injury rate has dropped by half from 2002 to 2013 – from an all-time high of 4.95 per cent to 2.54 per cent.

The bad news is that injuries, especially within the construction industry, continue to occur: the Saskatchewan Workers' Compensation Board (WCB) identifies "construction trades and labourers" as third in the list of 2013 Top Five Occupations with Injuries.

And the numbers may actually appear to be worse.

"When we're talking about an environment where we have a very strong labour shortage, I think safety takes on even greater significance," states Collin Pullar, president, Saskatchewan Construction Safety Association (SCSA). "The impact of an injury can be dramatic and instantaneous for those companies already stretched in resources."

There's also the flip side of the coin.

"I think risk mitigation can be used by companies as a business strategy," explains Thomas Archer, program services manager, SCSA. "Given the tight skilled-labour situation, those employees who feel they are being put at risk know that they can simply walk across the street and be hired by another firm that very day."

So how do you create a workplace environment that encourages safety? According to industry experts, it's

all about creating a safety culture – one that permeates throughout the entire organization.

Effecting change

Pullar points to the analogy of society's adoption of seat belts as an example of how one can affect cultural change.

"We've come through a period of time where no one wore seat belts to a time where it has become an automatic response for the majority," he explains. "It has become ingrained in our society and people see the benefits."

Pullar believes that Saskatchewan construction companies are now beginning to realize that there are advantages in having safe workplaces and healthy workers.

"I think creating a safety culture is critical," he adds. "It needs to stem from the leadership of the company, whether that company is a two-person shop or a shop of hundreds of personnel. And it has to be viewed as being more than just about money. It has to be about people being excited at their work and wanting to contribute to the well-being of the company."

Kim Sutherland of Alpine Interior Systems knows firsthand how safety culture can change. The company went from having no safety program to nurturing a safety culture – and reaping the rewards of doing so – in only six years.

"The best way I can describe it is to say that anybody can comply with a regulation or safety guideline," she explains.



Below: Terry Parker, business manager, Saskatchewan Building Trades.



Left to right: Colin Pullar, president, SCSA & Thomas Archer, program manager, SCSA.

“But not everybody is committed to safety. When people start to show their commitment to safety, that’s when you know you have a safety culture.”

Alpine Interior Systems started its journey down the safety culture path by getting its Certificate of Recognition in Safety (COR) from the SCSA, which involves taking several courses.

“COR essentially gives you a template that you can use to set up your safety program; then you need to enhance it and tailor it to your own company,” adds Sutherland. “It took us a lot of years to develop our culture. We weren’t necessarily conscious that we were developing a culture; it was more a matter of trying to get better.”

Sutherland admits that there were some bumps along the way.

“We did get pushback from some of the guys and had to spend extra time to show them the light,” she recounts. “But once they realized that what we were doing was meant to make their jobs easier and safer, we got really good buy in.”

The results have been impressive.

“It has been a bit of a process, but it’s paid off,” says Sutherland. “Our WCB insurance rates are now below the industry average. And, we’re almost at half a million hours without a loss-time injury. Investing in safety has been a good ROI. We’re getting work in safety-sensitive industries,

like mining, because we can show that we have a good safety record. We’ve done the work and it’s now paying off.”

Making safety a priority

SCSA’s Pullar has seen many companies develop strong safety cultures over the years.

“I went out one day on a surprise visit to personally congratulate a company on reaching its 15th year of COR,” he recalls. “When I walked into the company’s entranceway, the first thing I noticed was a huge billboard covered with photos of their employees and families, along with a note that said ‘This is why we do what we do.’ In this instance, that’s how the employees had decided to embrace safety – they created a strong safety culture by tying it directly to their own families.”

Having a strong safety culture, adds Pullar, equates to being able to attract and retain high-performing people.

“People generally look out for themselves, but with a good safety culture, people start looking out for each other as well,” he says.

Terry Parker, business manager, Saskatchewan Building Trades, is another strong proponent of making safety a priority.

“At the heart of any good safety program is diligence, making sure that everyone within the workplace is focusing on it,” he states. “You have to make it a priority and if it



isn't being followed, then there needs to be some sort of action taken and employees need to know that action will be taken. Employees sometimes

get mixed messages, that the priority is on production. Employers need to emphasize that safety is the priority. They need to be diligent in focusing

on it and they need to engage their employees to follow it."

Ways to achieve this, adds Parker, is through ongoing dialogue and communication with employees, managers, and supervisors.

Aim for the sky

"People have to believe that safety is always a priority," explains Steve Wallace, safety director, Heavy Construction Safety Association of Saskatchewan (HCSAS). "There is a lot of rhetoric out there saying that safety is the number-one priority. The fact is that businesses are there to make money. Safety is all about helping businesses not lose money. I believe that safety is just as important as anything else we do."

According to Wallace, the construction industry has made a lot of gains over the years but people are still getting killed or injured.

"I think that when it comes to safety, our goal should be to get to zero," he says, at the same time admitting that as long as human beings are involved, you're going to have the potential for mistakes. "People can get complacent with the risk or they can encounter something they have never encountered before and don't know how to react in that particular situation. Accidents do happen. In a perfect world, there would be procedures written for everything you do. The reality is there isn't."

So what needs to go on the checklist?

"First off, do you have a policy?" suggests Wallace. "Most companies will have a policy as to how they want things done. It may not be written down somewhere but it will more than likely exist. Second, familiarize yourself with the Saskatchewan



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And if an accident or injury occurs, adds Wallace, it's important to understand why things went wrong and how to prevent it from happening again.

"If we can believe that we can get to zero number of injuries, then we are going to continue to focus on improving," says Wallace. "The idea that it is possible is what will push us forward on the path to continuous improvement."

Misconceptions abound

Not surprisingly, workplace safety plans come with many misconceptions.

"Usually the first misconception I run into is that developing a workplace safety plan is costly because I need to buy all of this equipment and I have to pay for training," states SCSA's Pullar, who adds that these people don't necessarily look at the long-term ROI, but rather the short-term costs. "Another misconception is that it will lower my productivity. This is a huge misconception, as a good safety program can actually help a business perform better."

There are many resources available to help companies implement effective workplace safety programs – from safety-training organizations like the SCSA to local community groups.

"I think what people need to remember is that a workplace safety



plan is a process," says the SCSA's Archer. "People have to be realistic about how they get there. They can set short and long-term goals to get them started."

But, cautions Pullar, people shouldn't fixate on doing just the minimum.

"If people see these programs as a necessary evil, then they will do



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just the bare bones,” he says. “I often equate workplace safety programs to other necessary business systems like financial ones. Companies may start out with a basic financial system and as they grow, their need for a more sophisticated system grows with them. Safety is a culture that needs to be nurtured; it’s not something that you can get just by writing a cheque.”

A measure of success

One of the key components of any workplace safety plan is a way to measure the success of that plan. Whether your company is aiming for short-term or long-term goals, for a full-fledged program or a starter one, having a way to measure your achievements is part and parcel a way to grow the program.

For Alpine Interior Systems, success meant lower WCB insurance rates, the awarding of more projects, and a better workplace safety culture. In fact, the company cut its WCB rates from representing 10 per cent of its payroll down to two per cent.

“We never thought we would be where we are today when we

started down this road six years ago,” notes Sutherland. “Does safety pay? Absolutely. That’s the part that we didn’t understand at first.”

Measuring success can be as easy as looking at the number of near misses, at loss-time days and number of incidents, month after month and year after year, states Saskatchewan Building Trades’ Parker.

And according to the SCSA’s Archer, there are other ways as well.

“How do employees perceive the program,” he asks. “How have you engaged the work culture? It’s important to quantify, as well as quantify the results. Workplace safety programs are just one more tool that can be used better manage business.”

Identifying what data to use to measure the success of the program can also help encourage continued employee buy-in into that program.

“In the heavy construction industry in particular, I would say that we have made great strides when it comes to safety,” says HCSAS’s Wallace. “But if

you looked at the numbers from the standpoint of number of injuries alone, you’d see that they haven’t changed over time. We still have between 120 and 130 injuries per year. But, if you look at that number in relation to the size of the industry, you’d get a different picture. Yes, we have the same number of injuries per year, but the industry itself has grown three to five times in size.”

All in a day’s work

Developing a workplace safety plan starts with a buy-in – from the top of the company. Having leadership on board will foster acceptance and enthusiasm throughout the entire company.

The ROI of a good workplace safety plan is what comes naturally from the development and implementation of that plan. The resulting satisfaction will stem from having created a safety culture that is embraced by one and all, as well as having demonstrated to employees that theirs is a workplace committed to seeing them go home safely at the end of each and every day. 🏠

Suggestions from CCOHS

The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health & Safety (CCOHS) offers some advice on how companies can implement a workplace health and safety plan, noting that every company is different so every plan may need to be adapted accordingly.

Detailed information on the following steps may be found at http://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/psychosocial/wellness_program.html.

- STEP 1:** Take ownership and leadership, and get support from the top.
- STEP 2:** Get support from everyone.
- STEP 3:** Acknowledge current or informal activities and collect baseline data.
- STEP 4:** Identify the key needs and expectations of the workplace.
- STEP 5:** Develop a detailed plan.
- STEP 6:** Put your plan into action.
- STEP 7:** Monitor, evaluate and maintain the program.