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Three myths that are costing you THOUSANDS!

In the reporting period from 10/2019 – 9/2020, the top 10 violations for a construction company comprised of over 20,000 violations and account for over \$70 million in fines, according to the OSHA website. Further you can find that front line construction workers account for 2.5% of all workplace injuries overall and construction injuries in the US cost over \$11 billion annually. These are alarming statistics, especially when many of these deaths, injuries, violations, and penalties were avoidable.

Among the biggest sources of trouble are the conflicts that can arise between front-line workers and the safety managers in charge of making sure working conditions are free of hazards. This conflict exists because many times safety is a mere priority rather than a value baked into an organization. When we look at safety as a priority, we find ourselves compromising with its importance because priorities get replaced with newer priorities. Soon you have so many priorities that safety turns into a buzz word talked about at quarterly meetings or an "eye roll discussion" during a toolbox talk.

When you have conflict between your safety team and front-line team, you already have a setting uncondusive to eliminating injury or death. Now couple that with standard safety myths and you have a situation that is welcoming incident. Those incidents lead to hurt employees, damaged reputations, heavy burdens on your record and the potential loss of tens of thousands of dollars. As a matter of fact, according to the Injury Facts website, an injury that requires medical attention has an average price tag of \$42,000 and a workplace fatality has an average cost of \$1.2 million, both trending upwards. Not only does this affect a company's bottom line; it also violates an unwritten rule stating that employees must leave work uninjured and alive.

To improve the situation, you first must understand the myths believed by employees.



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MYTH 1: Experience + common sense = a safety strategy

This myth is usually one that comes from our grizzled veterans who have been working in the trades for decades and is one that every safety manager has heard no fewer than a hundred times.

They tend to say, “I’ve been doing it this way for 30 years and nothing happens... because I have common sense”. Then they go on to tell the safety officer to leave them alone and let them “do their job”.

Although experience and common sense are vital to keeping the jobsite safe, they don’t replace proper training and follow-through. Everyone else doesn’t necessarily have common sense. When it comes to having a safe workplace, the 30-year veteran can be one of the most unsafe employees. This is because with experience comes complacency.

Safety and Health Magazine published an article showing that of the more than 750 deaths they researched, only 20% involved greenhorns in their first few months on the job. Just because you have experience, common sense, and a track history of luck on your side, you cannot assume you will leave the jobsite free of injury.

MYTH 2: I’m quick and nimble so I can ‘beat the odds’

Our safety team reminds me of a story where a worker was on a ladder doing what I am sure all of us have done at some point – overextend ourselves rather than move the ladder. When our safety director questioned the worker about this practice, he said smiling that “since I have the reflexes of a cat, I can just jump off” if the ladder were to tip.

This may seem sensible to some since he was only about five feet off the ground. The flaw in this notion is that OSHA logs can show us hundreds of examples of falls from between three and eight feet that result in fractures, breaks and even death. Further these “non-fatal falls” account for \$2.5 billion annually in lost time, medical costs, and rehabilitation. Are you willing to bet your financial future and the well-being of your family on your nimbleness and “cat-like” reflexes? Most wouldn’t and would take the time to move the ladder.

MYTH 3: It’s a quick job, so ...

Time is a finite resource on the jobsite. There is so much to get done and stealing a few minutes here and there can go a long way to keeping a job on track. This leads to another common myth heard on construction sites. Sometimes even the Foreman can be guilty of this. The myth is, “I can get this done in a few minutes if I just do it”.

This comes up when a worker finds a task that only takes three to five minutes to complete. Maybe it’s cutting down a board quick or caulking a window. Employees think that by the time they go down to their truck, put on their fall-protection gear, get back to the task, 15 minutes has passed and it’s a waste of time to spend 15 minutes getting ready to do a 3-minute task.

I heard a story about a similar scenario unfolding. An employee needed to tighten a pipe fitting, a task that would take a grand total of 30 seconds. All he had was a 3-foot step ladder and didn’t bother to walk down the hallway 20 feet to get the 7-foot ladder.

He would soon regret the decision. As he stretched to tighten the fitting, he overextended, fell, and ended up having a high ankle sprain that kept him from working for several weeks. This hiatus could have been avoided if he would have taken a few minutes to get the right equipment. His nimbleness did nothing to protect him in this case.

There clearly are causes for concern in the construction industry. These problems are dangerous and expensive. The good news is there is also a rather simple solution. Here is what you need to do:

1. Make safety a company value. Values are on-going and never get “bumped” down the list as priorities do.
2. Eliminate these dangerous myths from your jobsites.
3. Work with a risk management firm that is dedicated to “de-risking” your jobsite.

If you can do these three things, you will have a safer setting for your employees, eliminate the chances of your safety record getting bogged down with claims, and keep your hard-earned profits in your business.