



How to Best Assure Safety in Workplace

The *Las Vegas Sun* newspaper recently received the highest award in journalism, the Pulitzer Prize for public service.

The Las Vegas newspaper and its lead reporter, Alexandra Berzon, in 2008 exposed the causes of a high death rate among construction workers on the Las Vegas Strip. The year-long series of stories and editorials uncovered a cozy system between contractors, OSHA and unions during a period that saw 12 construction site deaths in 18 months.

Berzon's reporting exposed such hazardous, corrupting practices as these: 24-hour construction schedules at highly congested work sites...the Nevada OSHA withdrew or vastly reduced findings of violations...the federal OSHA weakened safety requirements that could have prevented some of the fatalities.

There have been no further worksite deaths since June of 2008. The newspaper's and Berzon's investigation resulted in changes and improvements, including a safety and health worksite assessment of construction projects by The Center for Construction Research and Training. The assessment team issued its report early this year with numerous recommendations for improved safety.

Surprising ways to achieve safe work practices

Safety consultant Hank Sarkis, who delivers on-site lectures on achieving safety excellence, promotes six ways to positively influence safety in the workplace. Holding monthly safety meetings is not on the list of the top six. And giving employees safety training isn't on his list of the top six.

Sarkis, who is president of The Reliability Group (relgroup.net), developed this reliable approach to boosting safety from results of a study conducted by his company over a period of several years. The firm analyzed accident statistics from thousands of employees and factors involving safe practices to identify the six most important factors in achieving maximum safety at work.

Following are his top six safety practices:

1. Focus on reporting near misses or close calls. A *near miss* or a *close call* is an occurrence that nearly caused or could have caused a job-related accident, injury, or death. According to Sarkis, near misses are greatly underreported. And near misses are underreported because most employees feel they'll be punished in some way if they admit to being involved in a near accident or near injury.

How do you overcome employees' reluctance to report near misses or close calls? Simple, says Sarkis. "Use an anonymous reporting system. Tell employees, 'We care more about what happens than who you are.' Quit focusing on identifying who the person is and instead focus on

getting the information. Focus on making it easy for the employee to report a near miss. One company I worked with actually gave awards for reporting near misses."

"Keep in mind, near misses in many cases are an early warning system," says Sarkis. "If I were an employer I'd want to pay dearly to get this information before accidents got worse."

Incidentally, The Center for Construction Research and Training recommendations (following its investigations of Las Vegas construction site projects) included this: "Hazard and near miss reporting should be encouraged for all."

- 2. Job satisfaction.** According to Sarkis, an employee with low job satisfaction is three times more likely to be injured at work than an employee with high job satisfaction.
- 3. Cheerfulness of the workplace.** This means, create a pleasant work environment. "This came out of our studies totally by accident," says Sarkis. "We had a whole series of questions. Cheerfulness rose to the top of the major factors. Actually, the lack of cheerfulness can be a major negative impact. It's something you can't really force. It comes back to supervisor training, training the supervisor to be more of a facilitator rather than an order maker."
- 4. Employee selection and placement.** In other words, putting the right people in the right jobs. "In the extreme, I've seen companies actually allow workers to hire their own coworkers," explains Sarkis. "The workers decide if the new employee is the right person for the job. You don't allow the employees 100 percent of the hiring decision, but do give them input."
- 5. Job autonomy.** Give employees more control over how they do the job. Give employees the ability to make decisions.
- 6. Lack of stress.** The more stress employees experience, the more likely they'll have higher levels of accidents.

Safety Self-Audit Checklist

Another important way to keep your workplace accident-free and hazard-free is to periodically involve everyone in a Safety Self-Audit. Use the following checklist as a guide to look closely at workplace conditions to assure that no unsafe work conditions exist.

Safety Self-audit:

- 1.** Walk-through of the worksite and examination of work conditions.

Involve employees in this walk-through. Employees are your experts on the conditions of the workplace and the work. They can best identify and recommend corrections for injury and illness hazards.

During the walk-through, identify:



- Hazards associated with the physical conditions. Examine the building's structural condition and the condition of the floors, stairs, exits, and fire protection system.
- Mechanical hazards.

Observe equipment such as machines and forklifts. If this equipment comes fitted with safety guards, note whether the guards are in place and properly adjusted.

- Environmental hazards. Check for toxics and corrosives and for other environmental hazards. Such hazards might include excessive noise or vibrations, extreme temperatures or unusual lighting conditions. Make note of personal protective equipment that is, or should be, used by employees.
- Hazards associated with work practices. Study the use, care and maintenance of hand tools and power tools. These observations are the obvious ones. Other considerations include general housekeeping practices and job training.

2. Review job safety and health programs. What are your ongoing safety programs? What is the status of your safety committees, safety meetings, and in-house safety inspection programs? What is the status of your injury data?

3. Prepare a report. Base your report on the findings of the walk-through. Include the effective practices and conditions...and those that require attention to assure maximum safety for employees. Identify any actual or potential violations of OSHA regulations, especially those that could be labeled "serious violations." Identify any actual situation that OSHA would declare an "imminent danger" to employees, a situation or situations that need immediate attention to correct and assure protection of all exposed employees. Outline a plan and schedule to eliminate or control the hazards.

4. Confer with top management. Meet with top management to review and discuss the findings and the proposed remedies. Confirm the correction period for those serious conditions discovered in the self-audit.

5. Written final report. Redo the report used in the meeting with top management, with changes and corrections resulting from the conference.

6. Follow through. Make sure that all changes and corrections are made in the time set for their completion.

7. Re-audit. After all changes and corrections have been made, do a re-audit from time-to-time to assure that safe working conditions are maintained.

Safety training? What about the standard answer for improving safety, giving employees more safety training? Sarkis concedes that safety training is valuable and can be effective. But it's not high on his list of factors influencing improved safety. That's because, he says, unsafe conditions and practices are not usually the result of an employee not knowing how to work safely.

And Sarkis cautions against having too much safety training and too many safety meetings. "Don't be an activity junkie," he says. Don't have "\$1,000 meetings to solve \$100 problems."