Safety Communication: Staging a Phoney Death to Prevent a Real One

Talking to your workers about safety isn't always enough to prevent illness and injury. You must also ensure that workers talk to each other when they're on the job. After all, if workers don't look out for their co-workers, who will? Unfortunately, many companies have a hard time impressing their workers that the need to communicate is real. Here's a dramatic and proven technique you can use to shatter complacency and get workers talking to each other.

Staging a Fatality

The technique was recommended by a supervisor at a manufacturing company with a wonderful (and puzzling) record of no OSHA recordable injuries for three years. It's a small company of about 75 people. The floor crew has a penchant for hard-headedness and complacency brought about by the long track record of no serious accidents. They didn't have a safety program before the supervisor came, and the unspoken prevailing outlook was: "We didn't need all this before. Why do we need one now?"

The supervisor had a hard time breaking through the self-satisfaction. He knew the law of averages was going to catch up to them sooner or later. He felt like he had to do something before the inevitable serious injury or death occurred.

One day, while he saw an inexperienced employee stacking materials in a dangerous way. A veteran co-worker was right at his side. But he was eating his lunch and didn't offer a word to the rookie. The supervisor thought to himself: "Workers should be talking to each other. This lunacy won't stop until someone gets killed!"

Then he had an idea. If a fatality was needed to wake them up, he would go ahead and stage one. His strategy was to "kill" someone in simulation before the real thing struck.

Setting the Scene

At the next weekly safety meeting, the supervisor selected Joe, one of the workers. He deliberately chose Joe because he's one of the more well-liked and friendly persons. So his "death" would cause genuine sorrow.

The supervisor told Joe to lie down on the break room floor and used a large piece of white chalk to draw one of those infamous police "chalk line" around him. It was fun for the guys. Later, though, the laughter died as the seriousness of the situation began to set in. The supervisor directed Joe to move to the very back of the room, so he was no longer in plain view. Then he spoke exactly as if Joe had just died.

Announcing Joe's Death

He restarted the meeting as if he had just called everyone together, acting as if he was seriously shaken and upset. The supervisor informed the crew that Joe had just fallen 40 feet from a scaffold in the yard. In a slightly shaking voice, he told them that Joe was wearing no fall protection and no hardhat and that none of his co-workers spoke to him about it. He told them the ambulance had just left the building, but that Joe was not expected to make it.

The supervisor then fast-forwarded the clock and read aloud the detailed "accident report," which he'd pre-written. The accident report ended with "Joe did not die at the scene, but held on for two weeks before succumbing to internal injuries. He never regained consciousness."

The Effects of Joe's 'Death'

Next, the supervisor walked the crew through the steps of what would happen next. He did this in great detail and ensured realism. He talked about Joe's family going bankrupt from medical bills not covered by workers' comp; the foreclosure and subsequent loss of his families' home; the repossession of the family car. This was followed by OSHA investigations, fines, civil suits by Joe's family against the company, the closure of the shop

(bankruptcy brought on by the canceling several large contracts and the inability to get others due to our “new” safety record. civil suits and OSHA fines, etc. etc.) He touched on two of Joe’s workplace friends who began to suffer the effects depression. One friend, unable to cope with his new job, quit and moved away. Another friend began drinking heavily and eventually lost his job due to alcoholism.

His talk went on to a realistic-looking “Obituary” that he had written, detailing the family he had left behind—mother, father, sisters, brothers, wife and young children. He passed copies of these out, as if they were newspaper clippings.

Hitting Home

By this time, half the crowd was simply staring at the chalk outline. The supervisor could tell they were thinking hard. The circumstances were right out of their work environment, and he was making them face it without much need for imagination.

He finished by going around the room and looking people in the eye individually. He told them in a seriously hushed tone that Joe was dead. Now it was up to someone in the company to drive out to Joe’s house and inform his expectant wife and his two children.

The supervisor asked several of them individually (I picked the hard-shell guys): “Will you do that for us? Will you tell her for us that we’re sorry? Your husband’s dead? You could tell her that we know we’ve always done things we shouldn’t, but … [here he managed to make my voice crack] … today was just a bad day.”

When the meeting broke up, everyone was quiet. A week later, the chalk line was still on the break room floor, a silent reminder.

Conclusion

It may not have been a cheery and upbeat safety meeting, but it was unusual. And it really got workers’ attention when other methods had failed. Soon thereafter, the supervisor felt the attitudes shift a little and noticed that workers were making a point to communicate with each other. The corner had been turned.

Sample Notes for Chalk Line Safety Meeting

03 December 2009, welder needed to weld two fittings on top of tank.

[*Worker name*] falls from top of tank, sustains head injury, broken collar bone

Police called, 9-11 called

OSHA called for report

Shop closed for the day, police question everyone

[*Worker name*]’s family is informed

[*Owner name*] calls his lawyer. [*Safety rep name*] calls his lawyer

Shop reopens temporarily

Doctors operate to stem internal pressure on [*Worker name*]’s brain

OSHA brings an investigation team for accident.

OSHA begins inspecting entire business. Shop closed same day.

Workers laid off until further notice.

[*Worker name*] passes away

OSHA establishes responsibility of [*Owner name*], [*Manager name*] and [*Safety Rep name*].

[*Manager name*] calls lawyer

Case taken to Grand Jury. [*Manager name*] and [*Safety Rep name*] indicted for direct responsibility

[*Worker name*]’s family announces civil suit against the company

OSHA directs fines to [*Owner name*] as company owner $100,000 for incident

OSHA directs personal fine of $20,000 against manager [*Manager name*] and Safety Representative [*Safety Rep name*]

[*Safety Rep name*] is forced to sell family home to pay court costs and OSHA fines

[*Manager name*] and [*Safety Rep name*] found guilty at trial, given three years terms

Company announces bankruptcy

[*Owner name*] loses civil suit, fined three million dollars (more than asked for)

[*Owner name*] declares personal bankruptcy

Medical costs absorb half of the court award of two million

One co-worker suffers depression, becomes unemployable

Another co-worker turns to alcoholism

All workers suffer financial trouble from shop closure, some lose cars, one even loses a house

Sample Obituary for Chalk Line Safety Meeting

[*Your Town*] Reporter Obituaries

December 13, 2009

[*Worker name*] Dies in Workplace Accident

[*Worker name*], a lifetime resident of [*your town*], died Friday night, December 14th, 2009 at [*your town*] Memorial Hospital. He died of injuries sustained in an industrial accident at his place of work. He was just 30 years of age.

[*Worker name*]’s family wishes to give a special thank you to the nurses at [*your town*] Memorial Hospital for their loving and gentle care during his last days and hours.

Visitation will be Sunday, December 23, 2009 at Ellis Funeral Home between the hours of 3:00 P.M. and 5:00 P.M.

Funeral services have been scheduled for 3:30 P.M. Monday, December 24, 2009 at [*local church*]. Interment will follow at Resthaven Memorial Park. Arrangements are under the direction of Ellis Funeral Home. In lieu of flowers, memorials may be directed to the [*local charity*] at Box 123, [*your town*], [*your state/province*].

Born in [*your town*], [*your state/province*] on August 4, 1977, [*Worker's first name*]'s. parents were [*man and woman's name plus worker's surname*]. [*Worker name*] was known as very kind, loving and understanding man, who loved spending time with his family. He is remembered as a jovial man, who loved to laugh. He loved sports, particularly boxing and football. He was a member of [*local church*] since childhood.

[*Worker name*] received his education at [*your town*] High School. He married [*worker's spouse's name*] in 1999, and is survived by his wife and two children, [*boy's name*] eight years old and [*girl's name*] three years old.

Sample News Articles for Chalk Line Safety Meeting

[*Your town*] Reporter Telegram

24 December 2009

Supervisors jailed three years for killing worker in work platform collapse

By [*local reporter*]

Calling the collapse of an illegally constructed platform that killed a young welder a "tragic certainty" rather than an accident, a [*your state/province*] State judge yesterday sentenced the men responsible for the deaths to at least three years in prison for negligent manslaughter.

State Supreme Court Justice [*surname*] said she imposed the sentence on [*Safety Rep name*], [*age*], of [*your town*] and [*Manager name*], [*age*], of [*your town*], to reflect "the magnitude of the tragedy" and as a deterrent. "This sentence will, I trust, serve as a warning to others who, in pursuit of their own economic interests, care to be cavalier about the lives of others," the judge said.

The laborer killed was working atop a forty-foot tall storage tank at [*your company*] in [*your town*] on December 13 when a hastily fabricated work platform broke apart and collapsed. The platform, used to reach several fittings at the top of new tanks, was jury-rigged to a cherry picker. Welds made on improperly designed hand rails broke, sending [*worker name*] plummeting to the ground.

According to company attorneys, [*manager name*] was found responsible for directing the use of the device. [*Safety rep name*] was found responsible for failure to enforce the use of required safety devices, such as fall protection equipment that could have saved the worker. Tragically, [*worker name*] sustained fatal head injuries when he struck the ground, mere feet from an unused fall harness.

During the trial, [*worker's spouse*], 28, the widow of the killed worker told the judge that her husband had worked on the scaffold despite his fear of it. "He used to tell me in the afternoons when he arrived that he was afraid of going up there," said [*worker's spouse*], the mother of his two children. "But he had to do it in order to support the children … and pay the rent."

According to witnesses, [*manager name*] designed the platform as a sketch on the back of a billing form. Despite not being a licensed engineer, as OSHA requires for the design of human-lift equipment, [*manager name*] instructed two welders in the shop to build the scaffold. Both men were relatively inexperienced at welding, and it was determined that they used inappropriate rods to make welds that later broke.

Before use, [*manager name*] never determined how much weight the scaffold could bear. Employees strapped the platform to the basket

of a “cherry picker” style manlift for use. An OSHA representative commented following the accident investigation that employees had exceeded the weight it could carry by more than 300 percent.

“The collapse of this scaffold, designed and built by [*your company*], was not a tragic accident,” the OSHA inspector said. “Rather, it was a tragic certainty.”

[*Manager name*], who pleaded guilty in to second-degree manslaughter, faced 3 to 15 years in prison if convicted at trial. At the time, he admitted he was aware the scaffolding was dangerous. “I am deeply sorry for [*worker’s name*] family. I wish I had it to do over again.” he said yesterday, reading from a statement. [*Safety rep name*] commented through his attorney that he regretted not doing more to enforce federal regulations.

Judge [*surname*] said the case had given her an education in how “astonishingly ineffectual” the federal government has been in protecting workers’ lives. The judge pointed out that the Occupational Safety and Health Administration penalties amount to a slap on the wrist.

OSHA has leveled an initial 100,000 dollar fine to owner [*owner name*] in connection to the incident. The company has currently shut down operations until further notice, as the company scrambles to mediate another estimated $850,000 dollars in unrelated OSHA infraction penalties. Seventy workers are unemployed. It’s speculated the factory may not reopen and may file bankruptcy following an announced two million dollar wrongful death civil suit, brought against the company last week by the slain worker’s family.

Yesterday, the tragedy was still all too fresh for [*worker’s spouse’s name*]. “I’m an expectant mother left with an eight-year-old and a three-year-old. It’s Christmas time. It’s horrifying to think he isn’t here. I don’t know how we’ll make it. My husband was a good man, a good husband and a good father. All he wanted to do was make a living for us.”