Who’s Responsible for Safety?
Jul 28, 2010

Archive - 2009-2010, Precast Inc. Magazine, Precast Magazines

By Randy Devaul

The question of who is responsible for safety triggers a myriad of answers, depending on whom we ask. The regulatory groups suggest that safety in the workplace is the responsibility of the employer. Those same groups state that employees are also responsible for following all of the safety standards, regulations and procedures, although if the employee fails to follow them, the employer likely will be the one cited for negligence or inadequate training.

The employer may look to its safety department or safety professional as the responsible party for communicating the safety message and training employees in the regulatory topics. In this case, if an accident occurs, the safety representative(s) will be able to produce for the safety inspector a file of signatures of employees who have read and understood the company’s safety policies. This may or may not help the employer escape a fine, but unfortunately the damage has already been done: an employee has been injured.

Other employers may state that everyone is responsible, often meaning that the employee is responsible for an injury if the inspector finds that he or she was breaking the rules. In this case, the employer may feel compelled to take action against the employee or perhaps the employee’s supervisor.

Employees may acknowledge that they are responsible for abiding by the safety policies, but if an accident occurs they will likely point to unsafe conditions and will unlikely accept responsibility, especially in the face of paying their own medical bills or losing their jobs altogether.

It is true that everyone is responsible for safety, but that phrase alone sets up the employer and its employees for failure if particular tasks and responsibilities are not assigned. A Chinese proverb states that if two people are responsible for feeding a horse, that horse will grow thin – meaning that one always thinks the other one is doing the job.

A more effective way to instill safety throughout the organization is a teamwork approach that focuses not on regulations and standards but on recognition and correction of identified hazards.

This is not a behavioral-based approach, but it does require responsibility with accountability at all levels of the organization to perform the tasks properly and to recognize and correct hazards when found. This is not limited to unsafe conditions but also includes employee practices and expectations within the processes and procedures. This performance-based approach ensures everyone maintains a safety culture and safe work practices.

Here are some suggestions on how each group level can enhance safety performance:

**Employees**
There are four basic ways that employees can contribute to the recognition and correction of hazards in the workplace.
1. Conduct a workplace examination. It is not necessary to take half the shift to search for detailed hazards. Instead, after being away from the work environment for a period of time, the employee should take three to five minutes to survey the work area for any developing hazards. In a 24-hour operation, a lot of things can change while the employee is gone. Without a workplace examination, an employee has no idea what hazards may exist from the previous shift(s).

This step is often overlooked as employees relieve the previous shift and start work. When rushed, employees may be right in the middle of a hazard without realizing it. If an equipment guard is off, for example, the employee should check whether the machinery is locked out and if it is down for maintenance. If someone simply forgot to replace the guard when finished, the employee can do it, averting a chance for an injury.

2. Periodically, employees can get others from within or outside their assigned work area to do a “team” walkthrough. This reduces the chance of a hazard going unnoticed since a new set of eyes is looking for something with a different view, which may help identify developing hazards.

Another option is for one of those other employees to take a couple of minutes to observe a worker performing a task and flag anything that may be placing that worker at risk. This is not a performance review for disciplinary action, but a proactive approach to a safe work environment with safe work practices.

3. Periodically review procedures for hazard abatement. If a procedure requires exposure to a hazard that has not been addressed or has gone unrecognized, an employee can have a part in getting it corrected. This shows great initiative on the employee’s part and contributes to maintaining an injury-free work environment for all employees.

4. Promptly report to the immediate supervisor any condition or process that cannot be immediately corrected for follow-up and any interim action as necessary.

**Managers/supervisors**

1. Conduct a workplace examination to look for and correct recognized hazards prior to employees starting work. This is a specified action under the mine safety (MSHA) standards and is a proactive tool for general industry supervisors as well. The purpose is to look for obvious hazards such as missing/broken guards; material spillage or trip/fall hazards on walkways and stairs; and blocked access to fire extinguishers, exits and electrical panel boxes.

2. Conduct observations of employees. This ensures that employees are performing tasks correctly – following procedures, not taking shortcuts, actively participating in good housekeeping practices as they work – and allows early intervention or correction if needed. It will also help determine whether employee training is effective by observing proper task performance.

3. Regularly ask employees for suggestions or ideas on how tasks are performed and how they might be performed better or safer. A safety suggestion program allows employees to interact and gain ownership in safe work practices. Broadening the suggestions to how tasks are done overall incorporates or integrates safety into the production process.

4. Actively track safety suggestions or identified/reported hazards by employees to ensure hazards are corrected in a timely manner. Periodically review with employees the identified items that have been corrected so they see active roles being taken in maintaining safe practices and a safe work environment.
Employer/executive management

1. Visibly support your managers and front-line supervisors. Attend safety meetings periodically or conduct one from time to time so employees and managers know your expectations related to safety and performance. Provide the funds and the venue for other department managers to participate in safety discussions and help in resolving engineering or administrative concerns related to safety.

2. Include the safety professional as part of the strategic planning team. This enhances communication between managers and departments and lets other managers know that safety is an integral part of the company’s values.

3. Include safe performance as part of employee performance reviews. Making a goal of ‘zero accidents’ when the modification rate is off the chart is not reasonable. Instead, provide a measurement for weighted scores in reviews on how employees and managers perform in the support of safe practices. Examples are using and wearing PPE, participating in safety meetings, initiating actions to correct hazards when found and other positive, proactive means to show commitment to safety at all levels of the organization. This will communicate to everyone that performing safely is equally as important as showing up on time for work and meeting production goals.

4. Commit to safety as a value, not a priority. With a priority, safety expectations may change due to changing circumstances. As a value, safety is not compromised or cut out, regardless of changing circumstances. It should be an ongoing commitment to do the right thing no matter what has occurred.

Though not all-inclusive, these actions are proactive and help create a greater hazard awareness with the ability to correct or minimize identified hazards. Other items may include prompt reporting of injuries and incidents, prompt investigation of events (including near hits), and prompt replacement and use of PPE – with the managers and employer “walking the walk.”

The term ‘accident’ often is misused. By definition, an accident is something that occurs as an unplanned event. If an employer, manager or employee knows of a hazard and doesn’t eliminate or reduce exposure to that hazard, then the event to follow is only a matter of time and opportunity. It is not an unplanned event. It is not an accident but rather an incident (injury, near hit, property or equipment damage) that can be investigated or analyzed and preventive measures determined.

When known hazards are present and left uncorrected or not addressed, it is a matter of when, not if, an event will occur. An operator running a machine without a guard in place does not have an “accident.” An operator who tries to beat the guard or disables the guard to streamline his work process does not have an “accident.” A supervisor who instructs an employee or expects the employee to run without the guard in place does not set up an “accident.” An employer who encourages managers and supervisors to hit the production levels at all costs does not create an “accident.” What he condones, ignores or encourages is unsafe performance that creates the sequence of events for an injury to occur – a preventable injury that can also be fatal or life-altering.

Employees, managers and employers have more control over personal safety than they may think. Take charge of your area of responsibility and commit to require safe performance (including compliance) at all levels within the organization.

Randy DeVaul is a 25-plus year safety professional/consultant, internationally published safety writer, and author of three performance-based workplace safety books (www.filbertpublishing.com/safety.htm). Comments are always welcome at safetypro@roadrunner.com.

http://precast.org/2010/07/whos-responsible-for-safety/