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5 Important Issues in Construction Safety

While the hazards faced in construction are in some ways similar to those in other industries, there are unique issues that safety professionals and contractors must consider.

The implementation of a safety and health management system is much more challenging in the construction industry. These challenges can include low bid processes; transient workforces; environmental conditions because of outdoor working situations; multi-employer worksites; and an always-changing jobsite...just to name a few.

While many elements go into creating a positive safety culture in construction, here are five important issues for safety professionals and contractors to consider when addressing worker safety.

1. Educate the Workforce

For workers to perform safely, they must understand the hazards and risks they face on the job site. Given the transient workforce in the construction industry, certain workers may not always be as familiar with the work being done nor the hazards involved.

That is why contractors and safety professionals must ensure that the workers participating on a project site have the right skill set and knowledge to complete their tasks safely. Contractors and/or safety professionals need to ensure that everyone is aware of common hazards in construction.

They must also recognize that conditions change throughout the day, leading to new hazards that may not have been present when the work started.

Toolbox talks are one tactic contractors can employ to educate workers. These provide the workers with 10- to 15-minute informational sessions before a shift that addresses the hazards associated with the tasks they will be performing and how those hazards can be mitigated to help workers perform their tasks safely.

2. Look Out for Worker Well-Being

Along with the hazards that workers face on the job site, other dangers have emerged as serious issues in the construction industry. A recent study from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control found that the construction and excavation industries had the highest suicide rate among males of all major occupational groups.

Furthermore, a study from the Midwest Economic Policy Institute found that nearly 15 percent of construction workers suffer from substance abuse.

Protecting the safety and health of construction workers goes beyond mitigating hazards on the job site. Measures such as employee assistance programs provide a confidential forum for workers to discuss personal issues such as substance abuse or depression so they can get the help they need.

3. Understand the Project

When undertaking any project, all involved need a comprehensive understanding of the work to be performed, any requirements that work must meet and who is responsible for what tasks. These gains added importance in the construction industry, since many sites have contractors from multiple employers working side by side, and often dozens of workers performing different tasks for various periods of time.

Given these circumstances, contractors, project managers and safety professionals need to be aware of any regulatory requirements governing the work being performed. They also must understand the range of different groups on their job site at any given time (e.g., electricians, iron workers, plumbers, painters) and what is expected of them in terms of project safety.

4. Remember the Hierarchy of Controls

In some cases, on construction sites, personal protective equipment (PPE) may be used as the first line of defense in protecting workers from hazards. Safety Professionals stress the need for contractors, safety personnel and workers to remember that the hierarchy of controls begins with elimination or substitution of hazards.

These methods provide the greatest mitigation of hazards in order to protect workers and, therefore, should be pursued before moving further down the hierarchy to PPE.

"It's mind-boggling how many people think that PPE is always the answer," she says. "PPE should be your last resort."

For situations in which PPE is necessary, contractors and safety professionals should ensure that workers.

5. Employ Effective Safety Management

Many businesses have a safety management system in place, whether they refer to it that way or not. It is reflected in how executives think about safety, the level of training provided to workers and the actions of those workers as they complete their tasks.

To truly foster continuous improvement in occupational safety and health, organizations need to understand what leads to safety and health success.

As one example, Cal-OSHA provides guidelines for effective safety and health program management that include the following elements:

- Commitment and leadership from management
- Worker participation
- Hazard identification and assessment
- Hazard prevention and control
- Education and training
- Communication
- Program improvement

Contractors and safety professionals should examine each of these elements when exploring how they can improve safety and health programs to determine what may be lacking or in need of improvement.

"Workers need the mental as well as physical tools to do their jobs safely. We must provide them with the proper tools to fit in with the company's safety and health management system. Whether we have two employees or 2,000, we have an obligation to protect them."