Accidents Happen

by Denise David Baer

Eleven years ago this month, Gary started our business — with my blessings, of course. One week after he gave notice to his employer, he fell out of our apple tree when the ladder he was standing on twisted out from under him. He spent the next ten weeks on crutches.

His wasn't the only accident in our first five years of business. Our field employees suffered a range of mishaps — wood chips lodged in their eyes, cut fingers, carpal tunnel syndrome, back injuries — all of which led to workers comp claims. You would think that the cost of these mishaps, both in terms of human suffering and medical treatment, would have caused us to sit up and take notice. Instead, it took a stranger's motorcycle accident to open our eyes.

Gary and I were the sole witnesses to his accident, and he most likely would have died from his gaping wounds had we not stopped and assisted him. The experience made us realize that we weren't prepared for dealing with serious accidents. And if we were unprepared, we asked, were our employees also unprepared? We also questioned what were we doing to prevent accidents from happening in the first place.

Safety Training

Within days of that motorcycle accident, I called our local chapter of the American Red Cross and signed our entire crew up for first aid and CPR training. Without a doubt, this was the best thing we have ever done for our employees. Recertification classes have become an annual rite of passage for our entire company. Because Red Cross training classes can accommodate up to 12 people, we usually don't have enough of our own employees to fill a class. So we invite some of our subcontractors to attend. By including an electrician, plumber, or roofer, participants become more aware of the hazards inherent in each trade's activities, and learn what to do if an accident occurs.

Safety meetings. Shortly after we started our Red Cross training, I mentioned to our insurance agent that we had taken this class, and how it had opened our eyes to the need to prevent accidents before they happen. She told me that our workers comp carrier had begun a program of loaning safety

videos to its business customers. She encouraged us to take advantage of this free program, and it sparked us to start holding a one- or two-hour safety meeting each month for our entire crew.

The safety videos came with printed instructional material, which we then copied for each employee. The printed material followed the action presented in the video, making it easy to remember the video's message. The videos used humor to get the message across; apparently it worked, because our employees would make comments weeks later about the goofy antics of the characters in the video. Silly as they were, the characters were involved in situations similar to those our own employees found themselves in from time to time. The videos spurred the guys to discuss and debate the solutions, and to question whether we were following sound safety guidelines in our own company. When we came up short, the videos helped our crew to find solutions that worked on our own job sites.

Expert advice. We also brought in outside speakers to discuss certain topics. For example, the owner of a large painting contracting firm, which has an established weekly safety program, gave a free presentation on ladder safety. We even asked an employee who had lacerated his fingers while working on a table saw to write a report about the incident, and tell the group how he could have prevented the accident. The ensuing discussion led to a greater awareness of the inherent dangers in all power tools, and how future injuries could be prevented.

Company Safety Program

All of the videos and presentations gave Gary the incentive to institute a number of company-wide safety rules. For example, we now require everyone to have and use safety glasses, dust masks, and ear plugs as necessary. Supervisors keep a supply in their trucks and they are instructed to pass the equipment out to subs or anyone else who shows up at the site without their own. Purchased in bulk, these simple items are quite inexpensive — we spend less than $25 per employee — but the benefits of preventing injuries and keeping workers comp premiums down are immeasurable.

We also reimburse employees who need corrective lenses for the cost of prescription-lens safety glasses. Everyone has a hardhat, and we supply fully stocked first aid kits. Safety harnesses and respirators are stored at the shop, available to anyone whose job that day will require it. Our annual average cost of $100 per employee is a small price to pay for our employees' safety.

Getting Starting

The first thing you need to do to start a safety program is put your intentions down in writing and distribute this to your employees. Your official "company safety policy" can be as simple as a one-page letter stating your intentions to run a safe company, or it can be a detailed document filling many pages. Ask your insurance agent or your local builders' association for a prototype.

It's important to "walk the talk" with your employees. Don't pay lip service to safety; set an example by being safety-conscious yourself. Also make sure the means to safety are available to employees through free supplies or reimbursement for their purchases. Mail order companies offer almost every safety product you'll need at reasonable prices. Keep your supplies well stocked at the office, the shop, or on the trucks so there's no excuse for not using the equipment.

Implement weekly or monthly safety meetings. The quickest and easiest way to make safety a company-wide habit is through constant reminders. Contact your insurance agent to see if your workers comp carrier offers free or low-cost training aids. If not, once again, ask your local builders' association. If all else fails, simply get together regularly and talk about safety. And remember to pay your employees for the time they spend attending meetings: It drives home the message that safety is important to you.

Finally, if you and your employees haven't been trained in first aid and CPR, call your local Red Cross chapter. If you do nothing else for safety in your company, take this one step. Like the billboards say, the life you save could be your own.

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