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TOOLS

OF THE TRADE

Kirby Talks Safety

BY JEFF KIRBY

I'm a project manager for a custom home builder at the Delaware beaches. I usually have several jobsites going on high-end custom homes, and sometimes on commercial fit-outs. I came to this job after working as a superintendent for a large construction-management company in New York City, mainly building high-end office spaces. Some of those projects were large enough that each trade had crews with as many as 20 to 30 people working on them. Managing any construction project can be complex, but throw in the responsibility of maintaining a safe site and your plate is now overflowing, not just "full."

In New York, safety was more formalized than it is here in Delaware on the residential side. I went from a company that had a dedicated "Safety Director" and "Assistant Safety Director" to a company where just one of my many responsibilities is safety.

I have always prided myself on having a clean record with zero safety infractions. To maintain that record, I have a set of site safety rules; some of the basic ones—those I won't back down on and may be tough, even "dictator tough," about enforcing—I'll outline in this article. Complying with OSHA is not the point. These rules protect my crew and their families. They also protect my company from workers' comp and other insurance claims that provide an endless paper chase. I do not have the time to fill out

accident reports; I'd rather prevent an accident in the first place. Call it "employment insurance" for everybody involved.

Preconstruction meeting. This meeting is mainly to line-out the crew on the many framing and system details we need to get right. But among the items we discuss, we also cover safety, beginning with the locations of the fire extinguishers and first-aid kits.

First-aid kit. During framing, I usually tuck one out of the way somewhere; sometimes the only spot is in the Port-A-John (1). I also carry one in my truck (2). Smaller jobs require the typical first-aid kit shown here, but on large jobs, first-aid kits can be as big as or bigger than a roll-aboard suitcase. Once a house or project is dried-in, I move the first-aid kit from its glorious position in the Johnny to a central location inside the house. I then review that updated location during the next site meeting.

Fire extinguishers. I make sure everybody knows where the fire extinguishers are. We keep a simple, 20-pound fire extinguisher located at every exit. It's worth checking with your insurance agent: It could save you money. If your insurance company does surprise walk throughs (ours does) and sees properly placed extinguishers, you may qualify for a premium discount.

Clean up. This is my refrain: "Your mother doesn't work here—clean up." It may look like just a harmless empty water bottle lying



The author's crew always knows where the first-aid kit is. Until the job is dried in, the author keeps it in the portable toilet (1). After the job's dried in, he brings it inside and tells everyone where the first-aid kit will be. Having it on site is a start, but it's not enough. Everyone needs to be told where it is, at every step of the job.

The author also keeps a 118-piece 3M first-aid kit in his truck at all times (2). It has enough variety of supplies to be useful in a number of situations. Because it is never not in his truck, he always knows where it is.

Photos: 1 and 2, Jeff Kirby; 4, Nathan Rinne

Tools of the Trade



Check the panel on your temporary power first to see if it is GFCI-protected. If it isn't, then see if the quads are. And if those aren't, cords like this Bad Ass Extension Cord (above) now come with in-line GFCI protection.



There are also GFCI-protected multi-outlets, like this DeWalt Power Station from DeWalt Shelving.



The author requires everyone to wear hard hats until drywall is on every ceiling. The ones shown are Ergodyne Skullerzs.

there on the ground. But if the cap is screwed on, that's no longer a water bottle; now, it's an ankle breaker. Boards with nails in them, core drill plugs, wrappers, cut-offs—clean them up. A clean jobsite is a safe and productive one.

The old saying “perception is reality” applies here, as well. During inspections, building code enforcement officers notice when you have a clean site. It shows that you care, and if you care about keeping the joint clean, you probably care that things are done right. On the other hand, if your site is comparable to a teenager's bedroom, they may think you are lazy or that you don't care. That perception carries over.

Temporary power. First, check if the breaker in the temp panel is GFCI-protected. If it isn't, make sure the quads coming out of it are. And if they're not, use a cord with an in-line GFCI (3, 4). I have never been electrocuted, but I have heard it isn't fun.

Ladders. If I find a green ladder on my jobsite at the end of the day, I will throw it in the dumpster. I don't care if it's brand new. Green ladders are not rated for commercial work. They are not considered “heavy duty.” Orange and blue stepladders are the only ones that are acceptable. If you're using aluminum extension ladders, make sure that they are rated for a weight that is higher than your body weight combined with whatever you may be carrying with you. For the life of me, I will never understand why anyone would buy a residential-rated ladder to save \$100 and potentially wind up spending days in the hospital. The math doesn't work.

Hard hats. I wear mine, and I require every sub and crew member to wear one until there is drywall up on the ceiling (5). In commercial jobs, they are required until the ceiling is “whited out.” You don't want to wear it, that's fine, go home. I will send people home until they come back with a hard hat.

Harnesses and lanyards are required for all roofing and siding work. I also check the equipment expiration dates. I prefer an actual tie-off bracket to an eye-screw bolted into the ridge. If I get push back about wearing it, it's an easy argument: “Are you going to chance living the rest of your life as an invalid? Why would you do that to yourself or your loved ones?”

Construction is risky enough without adding more risk. I want my crew to go home at the end of the day. I don't need the thought of a kid or a spouse looking at an empty chair at the end of the dinner table. I take having my personal name on a project seriously, and I also want my job to be safe and secure and my boss's business and success to be secure.

Jeff Kirby is a project manager with Graulich Builders in Lewes, Del.