

The Safety Man Cometh

Improving the perception of safety in the roofing industry

By Randall D. Mundy

DO ROOFERS CONSIDER the “safety man” friend or foe? On most occasions, when I arrive on a commercial roofing jobsite to conduct a safety inspection, I can hear the whispers, “The safety man’s here.” On the surface, this has not changed much in the two years since I became safety manager for a parent company that owns three commercial roofing companies. I always wonder what quick changes in procedures are being made for my benefit. Are workers hurrying to find PPE (such as long-sleeve shirts and gloves if working with hot asphalt), moving warning lines back to their proper location or tying off the ladder? Do I make much of a difference?

As someone who worked nearly 30 years as a roofer, both as an employee and employer, I have a good idea what is probably happening. In some situations, the foreman may only be checking to make sure workers are complying with safety procedures that he supports and requires; or, he may be advising them to conform to the “troublemaker’s” (my) expectations for the 20 or 30 minutes that I’m on site.

As a result, it’s difficult to truly know whether safety is receiving its proper position in the workplace. However, in my opinion, even if workers and site managers do the right things for the wrong reasons, the worksite is still safer as a result. Because of political and economic pressure and a more enlightened view of the workplace by management, it seems that progress is unavoidable, even if the workforce is divided in its faithfulness to the program.

While businesses are morally bound

to provide as safe a workplace as possible, implementing an effective program can be costly. Businesses are only successful when they make more money than they spend; therefore, in order to be attractive, safety must be shown to save money as well as lives. Many within the



roofing industry, like those in many other industries, have had to be dragged kicking and screaming toward making the workplace safer.

The Impact of OSHA

In 1970, when Congress was developing the OSH Act, politicians considered that 14,000 American workers were dying because of workplace hazards, 2.5 million workers were being disabled and 300,000 new cases of occupational diseases were being reported every year (Goetsch 53). “Clearly, a comprehensive, uniform law was needed to help reduce the incidence of work-related injuries, illnesses and deaths. The OSH Act of 1970 addressed this need” (Goetsch 53).

According to Goetsch, OSHA’s primary mission and purpose is to 1) encourage employers and employees to

reduce hazards in the workplace; 2) implement new safety and health programs; 3) research ways to improve workplace safety; 4) establish training programs; 5) establish mandatory workplace standards; and 6) monitor job-related illnesses and injuries through reporting and recordkeeping (54). The agency’s presence over the past 33 years has pushed safety to the forefront of business concerns for many U.S. industries. Its efforts to prove the economic value of providing safe workplaces, coupled with the threat of major fines for noncompliance with OSHA standards, have convinced many employers to comply.

In addition to its many compliance inspections each year (35,778 in 2001), the agency also tries a softer approach that encompasses education and consultation. In 2001, OSHA made more than 27,000 visits to small employers and provided more than 260,000 workers and employers with safety and health training. Activities on both fronts are likely to continue for the foreseeable future, as President Bush proposed a \$437 million budget for OSHA in 2003 (OSHA 1).

Beyond compliance, some companies have realized that safe workplaces are good for business—that safe working conditions cut the high cost of workplace accidents and injuries. In a typical year, U.S. industry loses \$48 billion as a result of workplace accidents (Goetsch 19). Related medical expenses reach \$24 billion yearly, and families lose \$38 billion in wages (Goetsch 20). National Safety Council estimates that American workers

lose 35 million workhours every year, which does not include additional time missed for follow-up visits after returning to work (Goetsch 22).

Wisdom suggests that when faced with fierce business competition, progressive, forward-looking companies would do well to embrace workplace safety. Goetsch believes that companies which focus on safety can be more competitive because they attract and keep the best employees. Safety also allows employees to focus on their work without distractions related to unsafe conditions. These savings free up money for reinvestment in technology and help to protect corporate image (Goetsch 22). Such companies often hire staff safety specialists and create site-specific safety programs—often with more stringent requirements than OSHA's standards.

The Roofing Industry's View of Safety

The roofing industry is a hazardous one in which to work. Because of its high profile in the construction industry and the high potential for fall-related injuries and deaths, OSHA notices. Although a roofer is most at risk of death or serious injury due to falls, s/he faces many other hazards, including the potential for being burned or cut; being struck by objects or equipment; and being electrocuted.

Although the industry has made strides in safety, some within the industry have viewed OSHA as a thorn in its side. In a 1998 article published in *Professional Roofing*, Good wrote:

If there is one agency that causes roofing contractors more anxiety than any other (with the possible exception of the Internal Revenue Service), it has to be OSHA. Yet, despite a turbulent 28-year history, the OSH Act of 1970 only has been amended once, in 1990, to raise the amount of fines that could be levied against employers. Although Congress has attempted to change the act, it never put forth bills that could make it through both congressional houses and be signed by the president (Good 1).

The National Roofing Contractors Assn. (NRCA) reported this regarding OSHA's Cooperative Compliance Program: "To the relief of various small-business organizations, including NRCA, OSHA's attempt to institute another safety program has been halted temporarily by a federal appeals court" (Puniani 2).

Clearly, some companies prefer their safety to be as painless and uncomplicated as possible.

Firsthand Perspective

Almost six years ago, I started working as journeyman/foreman for a roofing company that paid little attention to safety. Management did only what it perceived as "absolutely necessary" to avoid OSHA fines. I had worked for the same company in the 1970s; when I rejoined the firm in late 1990s, not much had changed.

Although a relatively large business, the company was located in a smaller midwestern city and conducted most of its work out of the sight of OSHA inspectors. For more than 30 years, it had avoided OSHA inspections and audits. The company had been lucky—not only because it had avoided fines, but also because it had not experienced any fatal accidents or serious injuries, which certainly would have drawn OSHA's attention.

By the late 1990s, the company still had no formal safety plan. New employees received no safety training. No fall protection was required on most jobs. The company required no PPE, unless a general contractor for which it was working required it. No employees were CPR or first-aid trained or certified. The company's injury recordkeeping consisted of keeping OSHA 200 logs and posting them as required.

Such inattention to safety put employees and the company's existence in great peril. For years, the company suffered as a result of worker injuries and the insurance woes that accompany high injury statistics. Injuries ranged from cuts and bruises to burns, broken bones and sprains. According to OSHA injury logs, between 1975 and 2000, the company experienced an average of 14.5 recordable injuries per year. One year, the company experienced 27 injuries. In another year, the company had only nine injuries, but three of them tallied a total of 275 lost days for the year.

A New Era Begins

When a new owner bought the company in 2000, he recognized that safety issues needed to be addressed. Not only did he want to eliminate injury risks, he also needed to reduce the company's insurance costs in order to be more com-

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petitive. The company's experience modification rate had consistently been above 1.0 for many years.

To achieve these goals, the owner believed a full-time safety manager was needed to oversee safety and health for this company and two other roofing companies he planned to buy or launch. He wanted to hire someone who had experience as a roofer—a person who, if not trained in safety, would be able and willing to learn, would identify with roofers' needs and know best how to convince them that change was necessary.

I began the job early that year. Within a year, a general manager who shared this respect for a strong safety plan was hired as well. My job was not easy. I first had to be converted myself. While I recognized that the company could be much safer, I carried some of the same prejudices as my fellow workers concerning perceived hassles of safety precautions. To overcome this, I invested time and effort to learn about OSHA and its standards, and to read current literature and arguments supporting workplace safety.

Next, I had to convince workers that change was good—both for them and the company. Not only would they be safer, but their jobs would be more secure as well. Hefty fines and lawsuits could conceivably bankrupt the company, leaving them to search for work.

Initially, making the jobsite safer was a priority. Pre-employment and random drug testing was instituted. Several workers left as a result; some tried to test the system and were penalized. After three years, the workforce has become much more dependable and productive.

Fall protection was also an immediate focus. The company purchased warning-lines, guardrails and safety vests for monitors, and mandated that they be used as required by OSHA CFR 1926.500 Subpart M, Fall Protection. Many roofers scoffed at the new policies, but I tried to help them understand that this was the direc-

tion the company was going. I also acknowledged that while some of the procedures seemed silly, their adoption would keep the roofers safer—and employed.

Safety training—for both the employees and myself—was next. The company purchased training videos covering fall protection, in particular, and proper roofing procedures, in general. Employees were also trained how to use forklifts and cranes, and foremen and leadmen were required to become CPR/first-aid certified. In some cases, such as forklift operation, I became certified to train and certify others. I also received 40-hour OSHA and 30-hour asbestos abatement certification. With assistance from the company, I am now pursuing a master's degree in occupational safety and health.

The company's recordkeeping was also improved. The firm now documents all training, jobsite inspections, drug-test results and disciplinary action.

To gain worker buy-in to the safety procedures, and to emphasize the fact that unsafe actions affect not only the worker, but the company as well, I often relate stories gleaned from trade magazines. This hypothetical situation from a 1998 article in *Professional Roofer* is quite effective: A young new worker was killed in a fall. There were no witnesses, but fall protection equipment was available on the jobsite and visible from the ground. The company owner told OSHA investigators that the victim had been trained to use protective gear, but recordkeeping did not support this claim. OSHA fined the company \$20,000 for fall-protection-related violations (Staska).

An Added Incentive

All of these efforts were still not enough to change attitudes to the desired degree. Although some workers could be coerced to follow the new safety plan by threat of reprimands or termination, the owner wanted to motivate people through positive means.

As Geller explains, "outcome expectancy" is an important part of motivation:

... people motivate themselves to do or not

to do something by anticipating what positive consequences will be gained and/or what negative consequences will be avoided. So, a person might believe s/he can do anything and believe it will have a certain effect, yet will not take action unless s/he believes the outcome is worth the effort. . . . The potential gain from following an inconvenient process might seem too small to justify the amount of effort required for implementation (Geller 28).

Experience suggested that the typical safety drawing, scratchoff cards or safety trinkets would not work. I believed that everyone who worked safely needed to receive something of value: Money. The new owner agreed to give each employee who remained injury-free for a three-month period and extra 25 cents per hour for the quarter. This meant that each roofer who worked safely for a full year could earn, on average, an extra \$400—much better than a baseball cap, coffee cup or scratchoff card with a chance to win a \$50 gift certificate. The roofers embraced the concept.

When developing the program, it was noted that serious injuries might go unreported as a result of the incentive program. I have closely monitored reported injuries and am convinced that this is not a problem. The company also strives to keep injured employees working by providing light-duty tasks (when possible and with doctor's approval).

Positive Outcome

Since safety became a focus, progress has been made. In 2001, the company had 10 recordable injuries—50 percent fewer than the previous year. In 2002, the number dropped to seven. Only four lost workday injuries have been recorded in each of the last three years. The firm's experience modification rate has also dropped—to 1.0 in 2001, 0.95 in 2002 and 0.75 for 2003.

Earlier, I speculated what roofers might be doing and saying as they see me approaching a jobsite. Some negative attitudes likely persist, but many positive attitudes have developed as well. Some roofers have confided that the changes have been good. Certainly, they like receiving the extra safety checks every three months.

The company is slowly developing what Molenaar, et al, term a corporate safety culture. "Although many construc-

tion companies have comprehensive safety plans, a plan's quality does not necessarily correlate to the company's safety performance. Written safety plans can be effective, but companies must go beyond the letter of the plan and create a true 'safety culture'" (18). This culture is based on the beliefs, values and actions that are consistently shown and expressed by all involved. Management sets the proper tone by showing that employee safety and health is as important as profit; giving field employees a share of the process and profits; and creating the safety manager position and investing in that person's qualifications and training to achieve corporate goals.

As that safety manager, I can attest that management's sincerity fuels my own commitment to administer the safety program to the best of my ability in order to protect lives and the company's financial investments. This enthusiasm is, in turn, fueling workers' commitment to safety. After three years, the company seems to have turned the corner. As the company president says, "Little by little, we're winning." As the "safety man," I am perceived as the face of the company's safety program. More and more, I believe the workers realize that face wears a white hat. ■

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