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Bringing Safety to the Field

Through the Use of Job Briefings

by Ric Faris, RCDD and Ed Henkels, CSP

In today's hyper-competitive bidding environment, a poor safety record can increase costs to the point where companies are no longer able to win jobs.

Workers compensation rates are skyrocketing along with health care costs, and companies with even minor safety related claims are seeing shocking increases. Because workers compensation premiums are calculated based on a three-year average, a single large claim can result in a three-year period of escalated rates. Very few estimators or salespeople wish to raise their bids for the next three years, yet that is just one of the penalties for a poor safety record. Fortunately, there is one important tool you

can use to drive the safety message home to the field technicians—job briefings.

An Important Objective

Many companies believe they have a good safety record but are actually playing a statistical game of Russian roulette. When the underlying causes of accidents remain unaddressed, it is only a matter of time before an incident takes place. Studies show that for every accident there are at least 10 near misses. For every near miss, there are

hundreds of unsafe behaviors and actions. Identifying and eliminating unsafe behaviors is the ultimate goal of every safety plan. Only through controlling the root causes can managers control liability, workers compensation costs and business interruptions that affect the customer.

Reviewing the costs associated with loss-time accidents will reinforce the importance of addressing safety proactively. A seemingly minor sprained wrist or sore shoulder can be diagnosed as ligament damage or a torn rotator cuff. These types of injuries are followed by long recovery periods and huge expenses.

Creating a strong and active safety program is a long-term effort. For a safety program to be successful, commitment to safety is required at every level of the company—from executive management to field technicians. Over time, everyone in the company can work together to build the solid base of training and procedures, which will help all workers remain safe.

An Effective Tool

A best practice used by many utility construction firms is the job briefing. The job briefing is a daily discussion between the supervisor and the crew about the work to be performed, hazards associated with the worksite and strategies to mitigate risks. It is a very effective tool for keeping ITS crews focused on safety. To prepare for a job briefing, supervisors begin each day with a planning session where they:

- Define routine and critical tasks
- Identify roles and responsibilities
- Identify hazards
- Determine risk mitigation
- Inspect personal protective equipment (PPE) to be used
- Document emergency response information

One key to the job briefing is hazard identification. Supervisors mentally picture the job activities while walking through the actual areas where work will be performed. They constantly ask themselves how workers can get hurt in this environment. Are there hazards associated with gravity and kinetic energy (i.e., objects that can fall or roll)? Are there environmental hazards both natural (i.e., insects, water, heat, gasses) or manmade (i.e., chemicals, particulates, slippery surfaces)? Are there mechanical or electrical hazards (i.e., vehicles, machines, electrical circuits)? Written reminders on the job briefing form will help supervisors improve their efforts to recognize hazards. Note the list of common job site hazards and issues in the sidebar on page 18.

In addition to physical hazards present at the job site, it is impor-



tant to consider human factors. Human error traps are the stresses and distractions that can lead to accidents. These include things like high workloads and time pressure, distracting or noisy environments and attitude issues such as complacency or inaccurate risk assessments. When these error precursors are present, people are more likely to be careless

Common Job Site Issues and Hazards to Assess

- Emergency information posted
- Traffic control set-up
- Stored energy/line of fire
- Slips/trips/falls
- Vehicle ingress and egress
- Minimum approach distances
- Multi-contractor worksites (coordination with general contractor)
- Unfinished electrical, painting, floor holes, falling object hazards, etc.
- Attics/crawl spaces (heat, insects, animals, nails, decking)
- Energy source controls
- Utilities (marked and unmarked)
- Equipment inspection/pre-flight
- Fall protection
- Overexertion/repetitive tasks
- Confined spaces
- Tool inspections
- Poisonous plants and wildlife
- Work procedures
- Crew member qualifications
- Material handling/rigging
- Environmental issues
- Fire/explosion
- Public safety precautions (scissor lifts, raised floors, etc.)

or make bad decisions. Recognizing these conditions will help everyone work together to avoid errors. See the list of common human error traps in the sidebar on page 20.

The Remediation Strategy

Once the hazards are identified, remediation strategies are planned and discussed. The entire crew participates in this process. It is important to use everyone's creativity and to make the briefing meaningful to each worker involved. A three-way verbal communication process should be used in the briefing. This communication process ensures that each participant understands and acknowledges what has been communicated. The three-way communication process involves the following steps:

1. Sender gives information/instruction
2. Receiver acknowledges and repeats back to the sender their understanding of the information/instruction
3. Sender acknowledges or clarifies the message if necessary

The following practical example illustrates the job briefing process with three-way communication:

As the supervisor walks the job site, he sees a pile of scrap pipe in a room. During the briefing he says, "We'll be carrying cabinets into the building today. If people are walking backwards, they might slip on the loose pipes. What can we do to prevent this?"

A worker volunteers, "The person who is looking forward should take responsibility for making sure the path is clear."

The supervisor then suggests, "When you can't see behind you, use a spotter to make sure your path is clear. It may take extra time but it will keep us all safe."

Worker responds, "We will use a spotter when walking backwards."

Supervisor says, "Thank you for using a spotter."

Conversations like this drive home important aspects of good safety planning. They remind workers at the start of every day that safety is the first priority. They are the heart of the job briefing process.

During the briefing, the supervisor should also address common human error traps. For example, they should point out that although the crew is under the gun to get the job done, they can't cut corners. Rushing can cause mistakes. The crew should instead get caught-up by working steadily and keeping focused. Good supervisors will try to address different human error traps each morning to keep them fresh in the minds of the crew.

Necessary equipment is also checked as remediation strategies are discussed and developed. Crew members should bring their PPE to the meeting, and supervisors should verify required equipment is on site and in good working order. Worn equipment such as scratched or clouded safety glasses can be replaced at this time. If fall protection is to be used during

The company controlling a site is responsible for everyone on site. If a visitor to your site fails to wear a hard hat or safety glasses, you could be fined by Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) even though the visitor is not your employee.

Common Human Error Traps

Task Demands

- Time pressure
- High workload
- Simultaneous, multiple tasks
- Repetitive actions/monotony
- Unclear goals, roles or responsibilities
- Lack of or unclear procedures
- Extended work hours

Individual Capabilities

- Unfamiliarity with task
- Lack of knowledge
- New technique not used before
- Imprecise communication habits
- Lack of proficiency/inexperience
- Illness or fatigue, general health
- Can-do/macho attitude for crucial tasks

Work Environment

- Distractions/interruptions
- Changes/departures from routine
- Confusing displays/controls
- Work-arounds/poor instruments
- Hidden system responses
- Unexpected equipment conditions
- Personality conflicts

Human Nature

- Stress
- Habit patterns
- Assumptions
- Complacency/overconfidence
- Mind set (intentions)
- Inaccurate risk perceptions
- Mental short cuts or biases

the day, harnesses and lanyards should be thoroughly inspected.

Valuable Documentation

At the end of the briefing, every crew member should sign a job briefing form. The form records the hazards identified and the remediation strategies. This documentation process reinforces the responsibility of each worker for safety and provides a record for future training and improvement. Formal documentation requirements keep the activity focused and help make it part of daily routine. Combining the job briefing form with existing paperwork (i.e., daily work reports and project management reports) can aid implementation and integrate safety into daily work patterns.

When the job briefing form is complete, it serves as a reference point throughout the day. An important aspect of the document is the emergency number section. Crew members should always know where to call for help in case of emergency. Include a space for this information on the job briefing form.

When there are visitors to the site, they should be briefed and asked to sign the job briefing form. This ensures the supervisor is able to screen visitors and check for the proper PPE. The company controlling a site is responsible for everyone on site. If a visitor to your site fails to wear a hard hat or safety glasses, you could be fined by Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) even though the visitor is not your employee. Enforcing a mandatory briefing for visitors helps protect your interests.

Unplanned scope changes are a common root cause of accidents. Cabling contractors are often asked to move from one area to another to accommodate other trades. This may involve working in a section of

the building where conditions are not as familiar. Crews must recognize a change in scope, assess the new hazards and update the job briefing form throughout the day.

A Healthier Bottom Line

The entire job briefing process can be accomplished quickly and efficiently. A walk through the job site, an informal conversation and a simple form is all it takes. Most crews already hold a short meeting to assign work for starting the shift. The job briefing process simply formalizes the process and incorporates safety planning into it.

The job briefing process can also be used as a platform to further improve safety. Job briefing sessions are a great forum for weekly safety meetings. Each week, supervisors can discuss a different safety topic with the crews. This helps disseminate new information to the field as well as reinforce important messages.

Weekly review of job briefing forms by project managers and periodic audits by management will keep the entire process running smoothly. Supervisors may fail to take the job briefing seriously at first, but lack of buy-in will show up in the paperwork. Hazards identified will become repetitive, and it will be clear the supervisor is simply doing paperwork rather than thinking about safety. Audits of job briefing forms let managers know which supervisors need additional coaching and training.

The job briefing is an important tool for bringing safety messages to the field. However, it is only part of a comprehensive safety program. Companies with great safety records make accident prevention an integral part of their company culture. The result of these programs is not only safe workers, but a healthier bottom line. ■