Safety First?

The primary function of every company is generating a profit. If you don’t, you’re out of business. Shocking for a “safety guy” to say that, but it is true. Another reality: concrete is king. It dictates your work pace, not you. With those items out on the table, let’s talk safety.

The challenge is finding a happy medium between profitability, production requirements, and safety. A realistic safety plan can help meet all of those goals. Before going into what a safety plan should include, it’s important to remember the plan has to be yours. To be more precise, don’t just buy a plan, read it, amend it, and make it come from your company. In other words, make it personal.

The success of any safety program starts with management support. Good intentions fail without leadership and funding. Senior management must be 100% committed to the success of the program. This should be on the first page of any successful safety plan.

Next step is to ensure employee involvement. After all, they are the ones who are most likely to be injured. You can do this in many ways, such as safety teams and committees that can steer the program in the right direction and give employees a sense of ownership.

Then establish a program to identify hazards in your company and how the company plans on controlling or eliminating them.

A basic example is concrete burns (the hazard in this case). Now, how will you protect your employees? With personal protective equipment (PPE), training, first aid? Of course, some hazards will be far more complicated and solutions not so simple. The point is to identify all known hazards, set up a system for your employees to report new ones, and address solutions to those known hazards in your safety plan.

One of the most challenging aspects of any safety plan is communicating safety goals to employees. How senior management interprets the message is far different than other segments of your workforce. Take into account cultural differences, language barriers, and education levels when developing your message. Tailor the message to the receivers, and if necessary, use multiple versions or mediums to say the same thing. One classic saying goes, “If common sense was so common, I would be unemployed.” Be creative in how you communicate to your employees.

Emergency action planning is required by OSHA and needs to reflect every foreseeable event. Incident investigation, job safety analysis, and safety training also must be included in a safety plan. These tie into identifying hazards and how you are going to protect your employees from those hazards. This is also a tool to determine your safety training needs.

Safety orientation for new employees should be conducted before the employee is allowed to begin work, and should be used as an extension of the interview process. New employee orientation and safety training helps set clear goals and standards for work behavior.

A hazard communication (MSDS) program to identify chemicals and train employees is required by law and ranks near the top in OSHA citation frequency. Safety inspections are a tool to help identify hazards, see opportunities for improvement, and ensure compliance with OSHA regulations and company policies.

PPE often is used as a first line of defense. As an employer, your first duty is to eliminate the hazard by engineering controls or work practices. If they cannot be eliminated, then as the last step, issue protective equipment. Ergonomics currently is not covered by any specific OSHA regulation, but injuries still occur with alarming frequency and companies should address how employees work.

Recordkeeping of injuries is required by OSHA for all construction companies with 10 or more employees. This is a tool for identifying trends in every company.

Although this is a short list, please consult with a safety professional to develop a safety plan that complies with OSHA regulations and fits your company’s needs.