

Safety pays dividends

Bill Smith discusses the true cost of safety.

You've heard the sayings before: "Safety pays – it doesn't cost." "Better a thousand times careful than once dead."

You've read these sayings (or sayings like these) in the pages of safety literature and construction publications all over the world. You've seen them on banners. On posters. On websites. In fact, one website I visited while researching this article had well over 100 sayings, all of them geared at drilling the idea of safety into our collectively thick skulls.

But do adages like "anger is one letter away from danger," and "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" do anything more than make people smile and shake their heads?

Lessons from the field

I have seen my fair share of bloodstains in the dirt and trenches without shoring. I've seen upside down cranes and ruptured gas mains and once had a conversation with a guy who survived a power line contact. I've been on jobsites where safety took a back seat to things like deadlines and bottom line cost, and I've cracked my skull while not wearing my hardhat. All of which is to say that my education in construction safety has been, in large part, experiential – meaning I attended the School of Hard Knocks.

Construction site safety is often talked about but seldom truly understood. In the early years of construction, it was so misunderstood that the cost of being unsafe was built into the job estimate.

It was common practice for accidents to claim one life as each two floors of a building erected, or one life for each million dollars of general construction performed, or one life for each half mile of tunnel construction completed. In the days where crane operators still operated by the seat of their pants and the "no

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blood, no foul" mindset still prevailed, "accident prevention" was really more "accident reaction." Jobsite accidents were simply part of the process.

As they do, mindsets eventually changed and managing safety, as well as moral obligations to keep a safe working environment, became increasingly important. Managers and executives began to see that the cost of managing safety far outweighed the cost of not managing safety.

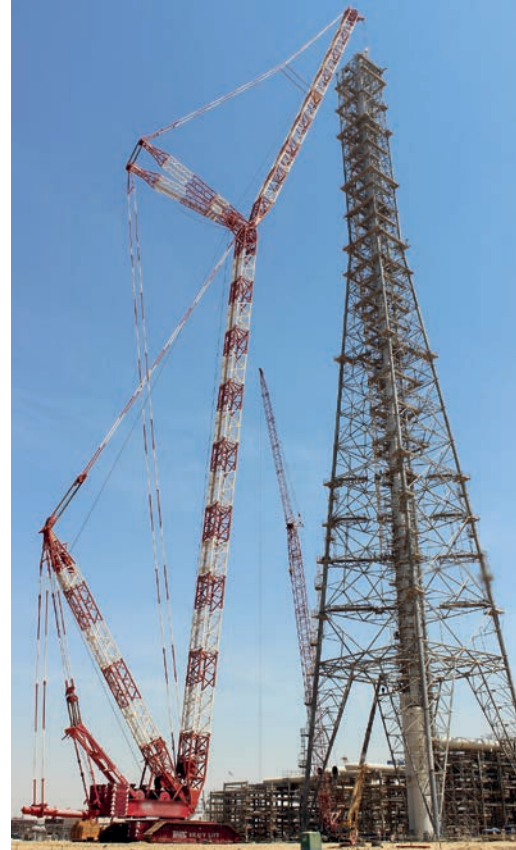
To put that in perspective, consider this: somewhere in the nation, during the five minutes it takes to hold a morning safety meeting, one person is killed by accident and 220 suffer an accidental disabling injury. Hardly something to be taken lightly.

Challenging relationship

For many companies, the everyday reality is that the safety manager is in a challenging relationship with the operations side of the company. Usually, the first corner to be cut in an operation to save time and money is the safety corner. In many cases, performing a task quicker means doing it with a smaller safety margin.

Trying to get managers to understand that "Safety pays – it doesn't cost." is a difficult task because the tangibles are not easily identified. When an accident does not occur, you may never know about it.

It's also hard to document when an employee, because of the company training they received, prevented an accident from taking place that would have occurred without the training. There in lies the problem that all companies face. What amount of time, and how many resources, do I spend on safety management?



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For starters, look at your claims history – your claims tell a story. Devote the resources and fix the problems – whether they're related to equipment maintenance, safety rules and policies, employee training, or having managers who won't enforce the established rules.

Worthy struggle

Safety is an ongoing struggle, but it is a worthy struggle with a clear and concise end goal: To send employees home in the same condition that they showed up for work. Study your history, pay attention to the signs that are all around you, and maybe we can all see the truth in the old adage: "Safety pays – it doesn't cost."

It is the right time to review your company's safety program? Contact the risk management experts at NBIS to learn more about becoming more proactive and strengthen your company's safety culture. Please call 877.860.RMSS or visit us online at www.nbis.com. ■



THE AUTHOR

Bill Smith is executive vice president of claims and risk management for NBIS.