Learning from Workplace Fatalities

(Part one of a three-part series)

Most of us can read the writing on the wall; we just assume it’s addressed to someone else. ~Ivern Ball

100 years ago a workplace incident had a horrific impact on the nation. The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire claimed the lives of 146 garment workers, who either died from the fire or jumped to their deaths. Most of the victims were recent Jewish and Italian immigrant women aged sixteen to twenty-three; the oldest victim was 48, the youngest were two fourteen-year-old girls. Many of the workers could not escape the burning building because the managers had locked the doors to the stairwells and exits. People jumped from the eighth, ninth, and tenth floors. The fire led to legislation requiring improved factory safety standards.

Today we have a myriad of laws - tomes of standards that crisscross and refer to each other - to point to safe work practices. Each law represents an injury or illness or even death sustained by one or more workers. With over 40 years of intense workplace safety focus, you might think that workplace hazards would be managed by now...that there would be no more fatalities or injuries. Yet, they continue to occur; resulting in significant numbers of injuries and approximately 5000 fatalities per year. The cost of accidents is not limited to the company or employer, the victim, and the victim’s family. We all pay for workplace accidents.

So, when it comes to accidents and fatalities, what are we not learning?

Do not put your faith in what statistics say until you have carefully considered what they do not say. ~William W. Watt

Supervision:

We continue to see a lack of supervision contributing to workplace accidents. In a society where we are encouraged to think for ourselves and to work efficiently, we often find shortcuts devised and implemented by employees who do not understand the full consequences of their actions. Inadequately trained supervisors, leadmen, foremen or team leaders fail to identify and communicate hazards.

Careful supervision of employees allows for intervention at crucial
decision making moments, when an employee can place his own life and the lives of others at risk. As we struggle to be competitive, we trim our number of supervisory personnel to a bare minimum, often requiring remaining supervisors to oversee multiple operations in multiple locations. Supervisors give project instructions, limited safety training and assign someone - usually the most experienced or longest hired worker- to be “in charge,” while they are off to another location or process, or run an errand. In charge of ...what? Is safety the charge? Rarely. Getting the job done, keeping the costs down, meeting the deadline, all these often take priority over safety.

What priorities are demonstrated when a supervisor leaves employees unsupervised at an open six foot deep trench and tells them he will be back in a while with some shoring? When ADOSH stops by to observe the employees in the trench, the supervisor, when he arrives back 20 minutes later, claims that he never told them to get into the trench while he was gone but he recollects that he did tell them that they had to get the job done before they could leave that day; which is the reason the employees gave for being in the unprotected trench. A lack of planning for trench protection and then leaving employees unsupervised near a known hazard is a recipe for fatalities.

As we speak of employer priorities we cannot neglect worker priorities. An individual’s priorities are set through empowerment. In order to empower an employee the employer must deliver principled safety training. “Principle” is defined as a fundamental truth or proposition that serves as the foundation for a system of beliefs or behavior for a chain of reasoning. (New Oxford American Dictionary) Since the desired outcome of safety training is a changed behavior based on a more enlightened chain of reasoning, instruction needs to be founded in powerful principles that are capable of bringing about that change. An understanding of the hazards, the potential for injury, and knowledge of the necessary safeguards to prevent an accident are the mechanics of safety and answer the “when, what, where and how” questions of forced compliance; while a grasp of “why” we modify our behavior is where empowerment takes place.

Regardless of how much an employer would like to he cannot force safety on an employee. Safety is a behavior that flows from the power of choice, not force. Forced behavior is only in effect as long as there is a method of enforcement that ensures the employee’s behavior is consistent with the rules, and is not self-sustaining. When an employee makes decisions based on the “why” component of safety it is personal, therefore powerful, and ultimately self-sustaining.

Consider this quote: “When I was a young man, I wanted to change the world. I found it was difficult to change the world, so I tried to change my nation. When I found I couldn’t change the nation, I began to focus on my town. I couldn’t change the town and as an older man, I tried to change my family. Now, as an old man, I realize the only thing I can change is myself, and suddenly I realize that if long ago I had changed myself, I could have made an impact on my family. My family and I could have made an impact on our town. Their impact could have changed the nation and I could indeed have changed the world.” ~Author Unknown (based on saying by Confucius)

If an employer has performed “due diligence” by training, supervising, and providing needed protective measures and an employee acts of his own accord causing an accident or a hazardous condition, we may call that “isolated employee misconduct.” The employer may be able to produce documentation of training, maintenance, or enforcement. What cannot be provided is proof of the employee’s understanding and embracing of the principles that underlie each safety standard. These are demonstrated through his daily actions and reactions.

If we were really concerned about the employee’s safety, convinced of the person's value, and dedicated to the underlying principles of safety, we would evaluate the comprehension of safety principles by observing the employee for signs of empowerment: to make decisions based on internal values derived from principles, not outwardly enforced by laws or fear of punishment. Rarely do we find the employee that is completely ignorant of the “how, what, when or where” of safety -what seems to be lacking is the empowering “why.”

“There is no use whatever trying to help people who do not help themselves. You cannot push anyone up a ladder unless he is willing to climb himself.” ~Andrew Carnegie

Next Advocate: Employee Responsibility and Authority
Our journey started in 2001 with the start of our safety program. Our workers' comp costs were in the hundreds of thousands of dollars; we had 8 accidents and were still paying for a bad one in 2000. Management said this was not acceptable and we started looking at how we could stop the accidents and build a safety culture within our facility. It was not easy but with help from our corporate safety group and a lot of hard work we achieved the culture we were looking for. By 2009 we were accident free and looking at going for VPP Star status.

In 2010 our costs for safety were under $10,000 and we had done so well that our workers' compensation carrier was giving us a rebate that ended up being half of our profit for the year. November of 2009 was the time when I knew we had a safety culture that was working. We were going through our corporate safety inspection and during one of the employee interviews one of our employees stated that they felt safer at work then they did at home. Imagine feeling safer around saws and machines than you do around a dish washer and TV!

Our time had come. We put in our VPP application in March of 2010 and had our inspection in January of 2011. It was an intense process but we learned a lot about ourselves and our safety process. The ADOSH group had a lot to show us and we had 90 days to make some fixes. In about 60 days we submitted our work and learned that we were going to get our VPP Star status. This was the proudest moment in our safety efforts and now we are on a path to continue to improve our system and make our working environment as safe as possible as well as keeping our employees coming to work safely and returning home the same way.

Claude McNeil
Environmental, Health & Safety Director,
Hunter Douglas

ADOSH is pleased to announce that Verco Decking Company recently achieved their certification within the Safety and Health Achievement Recognition Program (SHARP).

We also wish to recognize the following employers for achieving their recertification within that same program: Weyerhaeuser Building Materials in Phoenix; Tube Service Company in Phoenix, Sto Corporation in Glendale, and Sto Corporation in Phoenix.
Registration for each class begins 30 days prior to the date of the class. Most classes are free of charge but are subject to change or cancellation without notice. Some classes or seminars listed are not exclusively sponsored by ADOSH and may carry a nominal fee to cover the cost of course materials, space rental, etc. NOTE: The phone number listed for each class is the number participants need to call for registration purposes and may or may not be a direct number to ADOSH or the trainer. Students must call the specific number listed to register.

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<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Class</th>
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<td>8 AM - 12 PM</td>
<td>Lockout Tagout</td>
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<td>Job Hazard Analysis</td>
<td>7740 N. 16th St., Ste. 385</td>
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<td>602-274-6545</td>
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<td>Effective Employee Safety Training</td>
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<td>Back Injury Prevention - Sprains &amp; Strains</td>
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<td>Written Safety Plans - EMOD Rates</td>
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<td>Walking/Working Surfaces</td>
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<td>Confined Space Safety</td>
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The Central Arizona Project (CAP) was recently recognized for their continued participation in the Voluntary Protection Program (VPP), upon completion of their three-year recertification.

CAP has long been a partner in the VPP and a leader in occupational safety and health and ADOSH would like to congratulate them on a job well done.

(Photo, left to right: Darin Perkins, ADOSH Director, Pam Pickard, CAP Board President, and Dave Modeer, CAP General Manager)
Each quarter we put together a training schedule for Arizona employers and employees. An incredible amount of time and energy goes into the logistics of each training experience offered. ADOSH would like to thank the following Training Partners for their dedicated and selfless service to Arizona employers and employees. With their support ADOSH has been able to bring regular and consistent training throughout the state. A heartfelt “Thank You” goes out to:

- City of Show Low: Teryl J. Murray
- City of El Mirage: Robert Senita
- City of Peoria: Tracey Booth
- City of Tempe: Chris Hansen
- City of Flagstaff: Margaret Penado
- City of Prescott: Julie McGirk
- Yuma County: Diane Robinson
- Mohave Community College: Lisa Card, LeeAnn Benton
- Estrella Mountain College: Leslie Keefer
- Northland Pioneer College: Liz Flake
- Northern Arizona University: Robert Chavez, Jill Colucci
- Yavapai College: Mark Logan
- HBACA: Lisa Rugloski, Kay Young
- Circle K: Janet Meza, Kimberly Hoppa
- SCFAZ: Rusty Summers
- Armando Sapien
- Stephanie Steinberger
- Scott Higbee

At ADOSH we are well aware of the economic pressures that bear down on all Arizona small businesses. With skeleton crews business owners are reluctant to send an employee for a 3 hour class or allow time for a management member to attend. This last quarter of 2011 we are focusing much of our energies on basic safety management classes; to give a fresh perspective, learn new safety culture principles and energize our efforts to educate employees. Many of the classes will be held at the ICA Building in Phoenix but we will be making brief trips to outlying areas as usual.

I will be working on a White Mountain 10/30 Hour Construction Course for the first quarter of 2012. I have found that the 10 hour courses fill up fast but the 30 hour classes struggle for attendees who can commit as much time as the course demands. One solution is to divide the class up into many segments, to be completed within a six month period. I would appreciate some feedback on this idea. Please send your thoughts to me at Mandeville.jenneth@dol.gov

Three evening classes are offered through Estrella Mountain Community College for those who cannot break away during the day. OSHA 300 Recordkeeping Classes are being offered throughout the quarter to help you finalize your Summary Report at the end of the year.

See you in class!

-Jenny Mandeville
ADOSH Trainer