

Quotes from EHS Today's Safety Leadership Conference Session on Construction Company Leading Indicators

Insights
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A consistent theme of this year's EHS Today Safety Leadership Conference, and at every safety conference at which I've spoken this year, is everyone's frustration with relying on recordable injuries to evaluate a contractor's safety program and culture. When we focus on injuries, we're chasing a lagging indicator ... we're not focusing on the things the site does to prevent workplace injuries. Unfortunately, owner/customers and OSHA have focused attention on recordable injuries, so why are we surprised that few employers and customers focus on leading indicators ranging from management support to the percentage of site-specific training. Here are some random quotations, which I apologize for not catching word for word.

Owner's perspective – Bob Fitzgerald, Southern Company:

We do not like relying heavily on lagging indicators, but that's largely what we have available.

We hire literally hundreds of contractors each year, and no one has the resources to go on site and interview employees and evaluate the safety culture of every contractor, as much as we might wish to do so. There's no magic bullet. How do we as an industry set a widely acceptable? We do review certain numbers and try to determine when the numbers may be inaccurate.

So jumping ahead, what are some possible leading indicators which prevent or contribute to accidents?

Contractor's perspective: Frank Wampol, BL Harbert, 2014 EHS Safest Company Award Winner (photo above):

After focusing on developing leading indicators and using them to drive company culture, I have realized that all of us are gathering a lot of data that looks good, but are we measuring the right things?

A key indicator to me is whether the job is under pressure. Many contractors are good at making their plan and working their plan, but how do they do when they go off the plan? They're behind schedule or encountering unforeseen problems. A job site becomes vulnerable to injuries during such periods.

One can come up with ways to measure many of the proven leading indicators. Let's take "management commitment," here are some ways to measure ... how often do middle and upper management come on site? How often when they come on site do they attend site safety meetings? How often does upper management schedule safety discussions as part of overall enterprise concerns?

My note – I also favor using housekeeping as a predictor of both safety and quality efforts. A site may look messy but there should be order and a lack of trip hazards.

As another note, I've worked with BL Harbert and their upper management is engaged and involved, and they do not cut corners on the number of safety professionals involved. One of Frank's approaches is to so integrate safety into company practices that at some point, there is no discrete "safety manual." All procedures will have the safety actions integrated into work processes.

Insurer's Perspective Carl Heinlein, American Contractors Insurance Group:

Carl is the senior safety consultant for a contractor owned insurance captive which consistently leads the industry in safety initiatives. Carl is quick to focus on preplanning construction work as one of those areas which drives safety and injuries (as well as quality and customer satisfaction).

My note: many of my most severe OSHA fatalities or problematic OSHA inspections occur during wind down, in part because the contractor used its "A" team to start the job but then treated the finish as an afterthought. Not surprisingly, many surveys show that contractors lose customers after a successful project because they became sloppy and less responsive toward the end of the project.

Carl, like me, also preaches the necessity of HR involvement starting with gaining HR assistance in hiring better superintendents and safety professionals. It's well known that construction employers are dealing with a shortage of good craftspeople, supervisors and professionals. Carl commented that we're also seeing a "brain drain" and losing skilled people. In addition to obtaining good people, contractors must more effectively mentor supervisors and employees, and either move them out or get them good. He lamented the industry propensity to rehire past employees who had problems or were poor workers. All of these factors affect safety, as well as every other aspect of the business.

These are just a few snippets from an excellent panel discussion. Later I'll write about the detailed general industry session we had on Leading Indicators with Steve Newell and Barry Spurlock.

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