Improving Safety Culture
The benefits of risk management in terms of safety

With much of the industry discussion centering on the shortage of qualified labor that plagues both the manufacturing and construction sectors of the industry, a common theme revolves around changing the general perception of the work we do. Among the top is that manufacturing is perceived as outdated, dirty and dangerous. That last one—“dangerous”—needs further elaboration. In homage to National Safety Month, spearheaded by the National Safety Council, nsc.org, and observed in June, we’ll look at it here.

Manufacturing plant safety
The Bureau of Labor Statistics, bls.org, reports that 5,190 fatal occupational injuries occurred across all industries and occupations in 2016, the latest year for which complete statistics are available, which is up seven percent from 2015 and the highest since 2008. Of these, manufacturing accounted for 318 workplace deaths.

Approximately 5 percent of window manufacturers record a work-related injury annually. While this is statistically low, it is still unacceptable both morally and practically in terms of imposing unnecessary costs of doing business in the form of lost time, lower productivity and increased workers’ compensation insurance premiums.

According to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, osha.gov, lost productivity due to injuries and illnesses costs companies $60 billion annually across all industries. The agency also reports that companies spend a total of $170 billion each year on costs related to injuries and illnesses but, with comprehensive safety programs, they can whittle that down by 20 percent. This requires a safety culture with an ongoing focus on prevention rather than reactionary fixes to problems.

Planning an effective safety culture requires the same sort of disciplined problem solving outlined in international standards for quality management, the highlight of which is to identify and eliminate the root cause of an actual or potential problem. It is, in effect, a form of risk management. Nowhere is this more appropriate than in safety.

Construction safety
Falls, slips and trips are the single leading cause of death in construction occupations, according to the BLS. One particular aspect of construction safety with particular interest to our industry is skylight fall protection (including during snow removal as well as construction). An AAMA position paper outlines safety measures (e.g., guardrail and safety net systems) that must be a shared responsibility among all involved parties.

As evidence of the increasing importance of construction safety, consider the new construction safety sciences degree program to be offered this fall by Keene State College in Keene, New Hampshire, which will be the first of its kind in the United States. Students will be able to major or minor in construction safety sciences, which focuses on skills like critical thinking and regulatory compliance, as well as identifying hazards and solving problems.

To save time and tragedy, our industry is coming to better understand the true benefit of an effective safety culture. We should move to implement it with as much enthusiasm as a winning competitive marketing strategy.

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THREE GOALS FOR IMPROVING SAFETY CULTURE

Part of safety culture entails documenting and distributing safety procedures throughout the plant for uniform understanding, each with the three following goals.

01. IMPROVING AWARENESS
Establish a procedure to follow. Broadcast it through training and ongoing communication vehicles (bulletins, incident report postings, awards, etc.).

02. MITIGATING A HAZARD/CONTROLLING A POTENTIALLY DANGEROUS SITUATION
It’s important to acknowledge that people do things they wouldn’t consciously do when they are distracted by the job itself and production goals. They may back into machinery or take shortcuts, for example, or have an all-too-human incident of a simple slip and error. This is even more pronounced when business is booming and overtime leads to fatigue and loss of focus.

03. SUPPORTING A SAFETY-FIRST CULTURE
Clear work rules eliminate confusion and potential injuries. When a violation in safety protocol is observed by a line leader or management, go to the person and coach him or her on the importance of safety.