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Improve profitability by focusing on worker safety

by Sylvia Acevedo

The issue of worker safety is a common concern at job sites because of the impact on worker's health and the cost to the bottom line. Anything that delays a schedule or adds costs to a project can wipe out an already slim profit margin for the builder or contractor.

Accidents on the job cause higher insurance premiums and can add legal costs and complexities to a project. Reduced worker morale or poor workmanship can also delay a project's completion.

Having met with over a thousand workers and many builders, it is possible to reduce accidents at a project site where the workers are predominantly Spanish-speaking. The sites where accidents were rare made worker safety a priority by focusing on a couple of key safety issues:

- 1) Have appropriate safety gear available.
- 2) Take the time to instruct the workers on the proper use of equipment.

It seems simple. However, many safety gear products are designed for workers that tend to be larger than the average Hispanic construction worker.

For many Hispanic construction workers, their physical size is not as large as the standard used for tools, safety equipment, gloves and hard hats. Make sure that safety equipment is available to your workers in a variety of sizes and that it fits properly. Also, since safety gear tends to be thrown around a jobsite, make sure the safety equipment is in good condition.

As one-size-fits-all safety gear actually tends to be too large for the average worker, make sure the equipment fits. For example, workers resist wearing oversized gloves because they don't feel that they have good control of their tools. As well, safety glasses that are too large may slip, impairing the vision of the worker.

A supervisor should not assume that a new worker knows the appropriate and safe techniques for using equipment. Taking a few minutes to review the safety procedures. Have a more experienced worker do a demonstration to convey to the workers that you are serious about safety. Help the worker understand the appropriate techniques for operating machinery. It is important for workers to see their superiors use safety gear around the jobsite and makes them feel less conspicuous.

A commonly-neglected safety item is to remind the workers how to immediately power down a tool, machine or even shut off power to a building. Sometimes a worker loses control of a machine or tool and it is necessary to be able to immediately shut the power off. Having reviewed where the power switches are before an accident occurs saves time in the event of an emergency.

Worker safety is a growing concern for OSHA and for contractors across the state. Making sure that the appropriate safety gear is available and taking the time to provide safety procedure demonstrations can improve worker safety on the job. A safer job site reduces costs and helps to keep workers working so that projects completed on time are profitable.