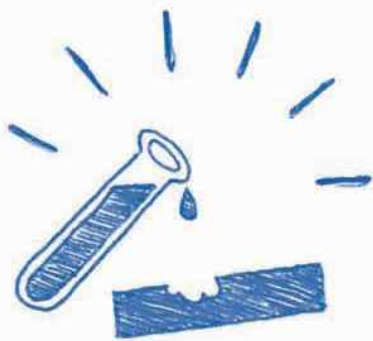


Safety: Training That Keeps Workers Alert



by Diane M. Calabrese

A child getting up to speed on wheels—a bike or skates—is a pure example of implementing best practices: Keen notice is taken of what works. Good results are replicated.

Yet somewhere between the weekly and monthly safety training sessions and the daily checkout procedures, complacency lurks. As time passes and things go well day after day, employees inured to sameness are at ever-greater risk of letting down their guard. (Even long-time bike riders and skaters fall.)

Obviously, no one can be on high alert 24/7, but the mind must always be engaged in what is going on and what could go wrong. Safety depends on fully aware and well-trained workers.

So how does a power washing contractor keep a team on its toes? Identify and commit to using best practices in safety. That means training, reviewing, and rethinking every job as though it were unique. In fact, each job, no matter how familiar, is unique.

The satisfaction of being in a well-known setting and taking on a routine task can put a power washing team in danger. (Complacency, after all, derives from the Latin word for pleasing or satisfying.)

There are “employees who assume that pressure washing is a very simple profession and it is impossible to get injured performing the work,” says Dwayne LaGrange, vice president D’s Pressure Washing Service, Hahnville, LA, a company he co-owns with his wife, Avis LaGrange, president. “Many believe that you simply spray water on a surface and call it a day.”

A contractor must correct any notion of low-risk work right away, says LaGrange. “I am quick to point out to my employees that anytime you are using equipment that utilizes fuel and chemical solution, packs a few thousand pounds of pressure, weighs from 250 pounds to one ton, [and the job] requires you to reclaim water, use a burner to heat up your water for more efficient cleaning,

and wash upper level structures—[there is risk of] injuries.”

Add to all that the optimism of youth that too often must be tempered. “Younger, inexperienced employees tend to approach a job with a sense of bravado and indestructibility,” says Jeff Schutz, president, Mobile Washer, Alexandria, MN. “Unfortunately, they often don’t see beyond the reasoning behind the safety regulations.”

Getting employees to keep thinking is a must. To ensure that employees “grasp that there are true and serious consequences to reckless job site behavior” no-nonsense reminders of what can happen are often required, says Schutz. He sometimes presents “case studies of previous workplace accidents” in order “to reinforce the importance of responsible job site behavior.”

The elements of training for safety include all the mandated Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) sessions. But they also encompass running a business in a way that keeps employees alert—beginning with planning straight through to cleanup.

The contractor has the responsibility to make certain employees know what can go wrong. “It is your obligation to take time out and train your employees correctly, by making certain that they understand that safety is key,” says LaGrange.

Identifying the Hazards

“In addition to regularly scheduled safety training, the job site pre-production walk through is very important,” says Schutz. “During a walk through, potential job site hazards are identified and an action plan for working around these hazards is outlined. Whether it involves locking out electrical cranes or securing potential fall hazards, it has been proven effective to relate real job site issues to specific

training that employees have previously received.”

LaGrange also points to the importance of looking at an actual job site and evaluating it for risk as the real-world experience that complements and fortifies classroom training and produces best practices. “Whether it be flat work, cleaning dwellings, heavy equipment, or just a simple driveway,

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it is crucial that a contractor know the scope of the work,” he says.

“Prior to starting a job, you should make note of all the potential hazards that exist,” says LaGrange. He recommends doing it “as you prepare the work estimate.”

The potential hazards can range widely. “Poor lighting, damaged manhole covers, damaged storm drain covers, location of water connections, and water pressure” are on the list, says LaGrange. So, too, are community-context issues.

Is it a high-crime area? Is there sufficient police patrol? What is the location of vehicles vulnerable to overspray? Those are all questions that need to be asked on the front side of a job, says LaGrange.

The list is not just for use by the contractor’s team. “Once you have documented the hazards, the items that can be corrected should be forwarded to the property owner prior to starting the job,” says LaGrange.

Getting employees trained so that they can identify risks and call them



to the attention of a supervisor or owner who is not on site is also part of the equation. The more involved employees are, the better the outcomes. If time is sufficient, at least at some job sites, employees can be encouraged to make their own list of potential sources of danger. Comparing lists and discussing them is a good way to counter complacency.

Preparing for All Possibilities

"Before showing up at the job site, we make certain that our equipment is operable and a preventative maintenance checklist is conducted for safety concerns," says LaGrange. "In addition, I make certain that all eye and ear protection is present, along with protective gloves, MSDS information, first-aid kit, fire extinguishers,

cell phones, and other vital accessories that are needed."

A system for communicating with fellow workers at a job site is also necessary. "As you are aware, it can be very difficult to hear one another with the pressure washer unit(s) and burner(s) running, so there is a need to create hand signals or whatever non-verbal communication signals that work best for you and your crew," says LaGrange. "For example, having a hand signal to turn the unit off/on, if you are being approached at night in a high-crime area, for unit malfunction, or if medical attention is needed."

All training in today's workplace must take into account the requirements of employees who are not fluent in English. OSHA gives an assist in that area by offering most of its tools in Spanish as well as English.

Enlisting the commitment of employees is essential to training that sticks. "You must... train your employees to be on the lookout for any safety hazards" that were not



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present on the initial walk-through, explains LaGrange. Traffic patterns, weather, and activity on adjacent sites are just some of the conditions that can change from day to day.

“Basically, everyone needs to pay attention to their surroundings,” says LaGrange. “Making certain that everyone is well rested is certainly a benefit...”

And because not all the danger comes from the job site or the equipment in use, candor is appropriate. Do not hesitate to alert employees to all potential trouble sources at a job site. “My last and final tip is never remove any currency from your pocket and give it to a strange person—at night in particular,” says LaGrange. “You could be setting yourself up along with others to become a victim of crime.”

Getting Help

OSHA provides extensive assistance for training workers (www.osha.gov/dte/outreach/construction_generalindustry/gi_outreach_tp.html). PowerPoint presentations can be

downloaded on topics such as flammable and combustible liquids and machine guarding. The presentations are designed to be used to train workers in 10-hour general industry programs. They are just the surface layer of what is available from OSHA.

Especially good OSHA tools to tap periodically are the posters and the easy-to-review, employee-friendly QuickCards that are available for free download at the OSHA site. Start at <http://osha.gov> to take advantage of the full array of training tools that have percolated to the top of the offerings. They all incorporate best practices.

Another good source of help, much of it free, is the National Safety Council (NSC) at www.nsc.org. The 55,000-member and not-for-profit NSC, which was founded in 1913, offers tools for OSHA compliance, as well as some creative mechanisms for keeping employees thinking about safety.

For example, the NSC encourages any concerned citizen to become a “safety ambassador” (www.nsc.org)

membership/safety_ambassador.aspx).

Without mandating such an activity, an employer can let employees know that becoming an ambassador is among the opportunities that exist for volunteers. The beauty of it is that an employee that volunteers as an ambassador is reinforcing his or her own knowledge of safety.

All professional organizations put an emphasis on safety and safety training. Moreover, insurers for businesses will usually come on-site to share tips for reducing risk. Tap those resources, too, for fresh approaches and time-tested ideas.

The fundamentals of best practices in safety never really change: One, know the risks; two, work to minimize risks; three, be prepared to respond if there is an incident; four, emphasize to workers, whenever appropriate, that for all the fail-safes put in place, human distraction—whether error or carelessness—is perhaps the biggest liability. There is no place for complacency when safety is at stake. *cr*

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