

## Building a Relationship to Safety

From JPCL, February 2023 By Larry Pearlman,

SAFETYand Consulting

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Each year in America, one in 1,000 workers will die from an occupational incident. For many industries, the death rates haven't changed much for the last decade, according to statistics from the U.S. Bureau of Labor.<sup>1</sup> As recent news reports in PaintSquare Daily News and other industry sources can confirm, accidents still happen with regrettable frequency, and often involve protection factors that were either overlooked or outright ignored by those tasked with ensuring safety and compliance.

There are some significant hazards inherent to the protective coatings industry in particular, including falling from heights, scaffolding and ladders and a lack of fall protection training, all of which make the top 10 on OSHA's list of the most frequently cited violations from this past year.<sup>2</sup> Other hazards include working in confined spaces, operating powerful and potentially dangerous equipment, being exposed to hazardous chemicals, materials and other airborne pollutants and more.

Over the past decades, the industry has seen safer formulations of coatings and related products, advances in personal protection equipment, tightening of regulations, increased training offerings and an elevated awareness and emphasis on health and safety, all of which have contributed to generally safer conditions on jobsites. However, it's impossible to eliminate every hazard on a coatings project. The challenge remains for industry employers to keep their workers safe and avoid many of the same pitfalls that have long vexed construction and maintenance work.

The right of every worker to go home safely at the end of the day is fundamental, so why are so many employers still failing their people? I don't have a silver bullet, but I do believe that creating strong relationships with people and to safety is a critical part of the solution. It may seem counter-intuitive, but I'm not necessarily recommending focusing on better policies or procedures in particular. Instead, what I'm suggesting is that individual leaders begin by improving their relationship to employees and to safety.



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## PUT PEOPLE BEFORE POLICIES

Imagine that one of your employees or contractors unfortunately suffers an injury on their first day on a job. Does that employee know the name of their supervisor and how to reach them? Does the supervisor know how to contact one of the injured employee's family members?

Would it shock you to learn that our firm once worked on a construction site where 10% of the employees couldn't name their supervisor? More disturbing still, the Institute for Work & Health tells us that less than 20% of new workers receive any kind of safety training.<sup>3</sup> It's a recipe for disaster, especially when we consider the increased risk of injury when people are new to the job. In fact, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, nearly one-third of days away from work cases are suffered by workers with less than a year of service.<sup>4</sup>

Having early conversations with your employees, speaking openly and clearly with them about your company's safety protocols and establishing the chain-of-command in an emergency situation—as well as getting to know them personally—is the first step in establishing your company's safety culture.

Let me ask you, the reader, a few questions about safety. Does your organization believe that working injury-free is possible? Are individual leaders willing to take a stand that injuries aren't just a cost of doing business? Are they prepared to take the necessary actions and have tough conversations to make injury-free a reality? Very often, making a genuine commitment to safety requires some kind of personal change.



Ensuring that employees working at heights are tied off properly is just one item on a company's safety checklist. (LEFT) OZTURK / GETTY IMAGES; (RIGHT) ADVENTURE\_PHOTO / GETTY IMAGES

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## FOSTER THE RIGHT KIND OF RELATIONSHIPS

Here's one example that can demonstrate what I mean by this. A few years ago, I visited an offshore oil rig in Africa. As soon as the helicopter landed, I was escorted to the person in charge. He briefed me about the safety protocols in place on the rig, and made it very clear that this was his ship and that no one would get injured there. It was very evident not only that he was in charge and had his bases covered from a safety standpoint—but, just as importantly, that he really cared. It wasn't a gimmick, and my escort was there to prove it.

Now, think about your crews. What's the first message you send to your painters? Is it about safety and about caring for those doing the job? Or is it about getting today's job done quickly and cost effectively? If it's the latter, it's time to make a change and get serious about safety, because any profits you might realize will pale in comparison to the potential costs of one of your employees getting seriously injured or killed on a jobsite.

Perhaps you personally are sending the right safety message, but what about your crew leaders and supervisors? How do they demonstrate care? Maybe they know everyone's name. Maybe they talk about last week's game. Perhaps they even know something about workers' families. This kind of relationship is a great start, but it isn't enough to keep crews safe.

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Are they willing to have an uncomfortable conversation about fall protection and to explain why it's necessary? The right kind of allows for positive reinforcement when workers are safe, and corrective conversation when they need to do something differently. To really embed a culture of safety, supervisors will need to reinforce positive safety behaviors four times as often as they have a corrective conversation. This 4:1 ratio has been proven numerous times in safety and behavioral research. These reinforcements can't just be saying, "Thanks for working safely." They need to be specific and behavioral. A great conversation starts with, "Hey, I care about you. I see you are tied off in the right place with the right length of lanyard. I appreciate you doing fall protection right!"



Leaders communicating a clear message of caring about the safety of their employees is critical for establishing a relationship to safety. ISAYILDIZ / GETTY IMAGES

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**COMMUNICATE A CLEAR SAFETY MESSAGE**

If the industry is serious about improving safety, eliminating fatalities and working injury-free, the relationship between people and safety has to change. Relationships are the foundation of accomplishment, and once your company has this relationship in place, it's time to nail the "must wins" for safety. These include clear expectations,

guiding principles, positive and corrective safety conversations and excellent on-boarding and training.

Our company recommends implementing a set of safety “Golden Rules,” presented mostly in pictures with just a few words in, as a minimum, English and Spanish. Those rules illustrate significant risks and/or mitigations, such as:

- Tie off when working at heights;
- Inspect scaffolding;
- Use a ladder as a last option;
- Use properly fitted PPE;
- Always wear a seatbelt in a vehicle;
- No drugs or alcohol on premises; and
- Do not enter confined spaces without a permit.

In addition to listing these hazards, clearly illustrate their impacts. Use videos that explain the risks and show the consequences of not following the rules. Require all employees to receive relevant industry safety certifications, or mandate that your employees must pass an in-house safety test (multi-lingual, of course) before setting foot on a jobsite. Concurrently, send a message of genuine caring. These efforts aren't about numbers, profits or safety records—it's about genuine concern for people.

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Use the relationships you have built with people to observe, reinforce and correct safe or unsafe behavior. It's tough for supervisors in the field to balance safety with other performance objectives, but if all employees ever hear about is schedule and cost, they'll get the message that safety is not the priority.

Messages must be balanced, and communication must remain clear and open between the employer and employees. Make sure that you have answers to any questions your employees may have about your company's relationship to safety. And above all, don't ever let anyone on the job without the right equipment and training.

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Larry Pearlman is President of Safety And COnsulting Associates, Inc., a consulting firm specializing in safety culture, leadership and management systems. He has a broad range of industry experiences, including in the manufacturing, transportation and energy sectors. His expertise includes human resource management, enterprise risk, leadership, safety and cultural change. Pearlman earned his MA in labor and industrial relations human resources from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and a BBA from the University of Iowa. He is also a member of JPCL publisher Technology Publishing Company's Board of Directors, as well as an adjunct professor at the University of Illinois.

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