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Looking Beyond COVID-19 in Construction Safety: Focus for 2021

By Frank Baxter, Director of Loss Prevention, and Tom Madden, Senior Loss Prevention Manager, Construction Risk Partners

The year of 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic has altered all of our lives in so many ways. As business leaders, we now have the opportunity to analyze some of the key takeaways that we have learned during this unprecedented and challenging times, which can then help us improve and provide focus for our safety programs in 2021 and beyond.

Creating a Culture

Whether safety is held as a true core value or an area that you are striving for better performance, the pandemic has touched every contractor, tradesperson and project in some way. There is currently an extremely heightened awareness to safety across the board and a newfound respect for the safety professionals who have lead teams through these difficult times. There is always an opportunity to improve the culture within our companies, but now is the time to build upon the raised awareness that COVID-19 has brought. Taking steps to show genuine care and concern for your employees and their well-being is the hallmark for increasing your safety culture, but a need to do this unrelated to the pandemic is especially important this year and moving forward.

Identifying Exposures

Take the time now to develop or enhance your process for identifying exposures. Just think, less than a year ago, no one was anticipating shutting down projects and offices due to state or local mandates to control the spread of COVID-19. This year, having a broader lens on exposures will help to drive success. The most important part of identifying an exposure or behavior on a jobsite is to take immediate action to correct the observation on the spot in order to prevent a loss. Identifying

exposures can also mean enhancing the upfront preplanning for the job before it begins with standardizing checklists, or implementing a process into your weekly project meetings where you take the time to discuss and plan for all higher-exposure tasks in the project look-ahead schedule. Make it a common practice to request or write a job safety analysis (JSA) for specific tasks or types of work.

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Taking Steps Forward

Now that you have identified how much exposure you may have, here are some ideas to get back on track:

- When you can do so safely, reintroducing in-person meetings should be a top priority for team-building purposes. Many companies have used technology to meet required obligations for orientations via online training programs—but we are finding that the average tradesperson does not find much value in this training format. OSHA training has also been offered online, but in-person teaching brings many intangibles, and it is the preferred method for adult learning and retention.

- Develop a strategy to reemphasize your commitment to both your safety program and employees. This strategy must include a communication package that can be developed by others but needs to be delivered from top management.
- Take the time to reevaluate your safety, health and environmental program. COVID-19 should have helped to identify some deficiencies. Look at what goals were originally in place at the beginning of 2020, and use this as a starting off point for goals in 2021. This may be a great time to assess your overall approach to risk.

Construction Risk Partners (CRP) has a resource called Management of Risk Evaluation (M.O.R.E.) designed to help identify risk within your construction operations. M.O.R.E. is a comprehensive review of a company's current risk management program. It is broken into several key areas, including leadership and management overview, employment practices, general safety, emergency readiness, fleet management, general liability and claims.

“Our firm committed the necessary time and resources to go through the Construction Risk Partners’ M.O.R.E. assessment a few years ago,” recalls Sandra S. Meyer, vice president of risk management at Messer Construction Co. “It helped our risk team to identify and prioritize programs that we should focus on in both the short and long terms, with the ultimate goal of lowering our total cost of risk. It is a wonderful tool that is specifically built for contractors. Overall, we found the process to be user friendly and a worthwhile endeavor for Messer.”

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