



SSU 2008-05

SAFETY DOES NOT GET A VACATION!

By SeaBright Insurance Loss Control



In many industries, the number of work-related injuries and near misses seems to increase during the summertime. Have you ever wondered why that might happen? Some firms believe an increase in employee injuries takes place when supervisors go on vacation, and assign someone else to fill in on a temporary basis. The problem is substitutes do not always have the necessary experience in safety leadership, although they may be very good at production operations.

Accident prevention can be especially critical during this season. Summertime means peak activity for many industries; however, many employees at all levels take vacations. Companies hire short-term or part-time workers to take up the slack. Hours are long; experience may be short; the work can be extremely hot and humid. This is a set-up for employee fatigue, injuries, and illness.

Who is Watching the Store?

If accident prevention is in the hands of newly assigned supervisors, do they fully understand all the firm's safety policies and procedures? Do they know how to correct dangerous behavior and recognize unsafe work practices? Can they achieve high levels of production and maintain good employee morale at the same time? These are all important supervisory skills, but few people have these skills without adequate training and experience.

Absences during Christmas and other holidays, hunting or fishing seasons, can also temporarily upset the work-force balance. Personal problems such as sudden illness or death in the family can take a supervisor off the job and leave a crew without experienced leadership. What can a company do to prepare for the absence of key employees? How can they assure *both* production and safety in such situations?

A Smart Company Plans Ahead

Some companies have developed an innovative system for preparing "next in line" personnel to take over when supervisors are absent or on vacation. Management assigns these employees to share supervisory duties during non-critical times when job pressures are lowest. Supervisors teach and coach trainees in safety management responsibilities while they are around to guide them. This system of mentoring prepares interim leaders who can help prevent employee accidents along with overseeing operations. In some cases, it also identifies and grooms chosen workers for future, more permanent leadership roles. This is a classic case of looking ahead and planning for unforeseen events, which is what safety management is all about.

The most critical accident prevention responsibilities depend upon the specific hazards in a firm's operations. In addition, nearly all companies need to have several basic safety management strategies in place. SeaBright helps customers develop these by providing training resources for both basic and technical safety needs. SeaBright's *Supervisor Safety Updates*, (SSU) and *Safety Meeting Outlines*, (SMO) are located in the Loss Control – BrightSource area of SeaBright's web page at <http://www.sbic.com/brightsource.html>. The following training topics are just a few we feel temporary supervisors should understand well. Each topic includes a reference SSU number.

- **Show How an Accident Investigation Should Be Conducted** (SSU 2002-04)

When an accident occurs, it is important to establish the “who, what, when, where and why” of the incident. People forget facts, or memory distorts them. A thorough accident investigation not only provides critical information for preventing future injuries, but may also turn up evidence for defending a false claim or a third party that is responsible.

- **Teach Them How to Run a Good Safety Meeting** (SSU 1998-08)

Safety meetings encourage safety awareness, and remind everyone how to avoid hazards by following safe work practices. Well-run meetings involve everyone in discussions, rather than consisting of a boring lecture. This is a learned skill, but it does not come naturally for all people.

- **Train Them to Handle Employee Drug & Alcohol Problems** (SSUs 2002-07 & 2002-08)

The use of drugs or alcohol on the job can jeopardize everyone on the crew, as well as the user. All supervisors should know how to identify the symptoms of drug abuse and must know the appropriate steps to take if they suspect substance abuse. They also need to know what *not to do* in handling problems of this nature.

- **Be Sure They Know What To Do In An Emergency** (SSU 2002-03)

People in charge must know how to act swiftly and correctly during an emergency, to protect both people and property. Every company should have a customized crisis management plan. Substitute supervisors need to know what to do, how to lead, and where to go for help in all cases.

- **Instruct Them in OSHA Inspection Protocol** (SSU 1998-10)

If an OSHA inspector drops in while your regular supervisor is on vacation, will the supervisor's replacement properly handle opening and closing conferences? The supervisor needs to balance being courteous and willing to comply with safety codes, and protecting the company's rights. Handling things correctly can go a long way in your favor.

- **Make Regular Safety Inspections a Priority** (SSU 2002-05)

Safety hazards sometimes go unnoticed, either because we forget to look for them or because they become lost in the big production picture. It is not enough to just “keep an eye out” for hazards. Planned inspections, using a customized checklist, are one of the best ways to prevent accidents before they happen. It is important to observe *how* people work, for example how they lift and handle materials, as well as unsafe behaviors.

- **Demonstrate How to Motivate Good Safety Performance** (SSU 2007-04)

The supervisor, serving as coach and mentor in this process, should first *model* good safety leadership. This involves setting a good example at all times, treating everyone equally and fairly, giving recognition to crewmembers for safe work behavior and knowing how to give constructive criticism. This can be a challenge for new supervisors and is best learned by observing someone else who does it right.

- **Make Sure All Jobsite Hazards Have Been Analyzed** (SSU 1999-10)

Whether your company's unique safety concerns have to do with confined spaces, machine guarding, lockout/tagout, chemicals, construction, or other high-risk operations, a job safety analysis identifies the specific hazards and necessary protection for each step of an operation. All employees and supervisors need to read and understand the written analysis. SeaBright's collection of SSUs, along with several hundred *Safety Meeting Outlines* on technical topics is useful resources for this kind of training.

Supervisors Need Written Job Descriptions

Written job descriptions are necessary not only to clarify the safety responsibilities of a regular supervisor, but also to serve as a training tool for the next in line. It is important to clarify for the interim supervisor any duties, such as new employee orientation and training that they will not need to perform. SeaBright Loss Control recommends making all permanent supervisors accountable for the following, at a minimum:

- New Employee Orientations
- Employee Safety Meetings
- Jobsite Inspections
- Safety Rules and Work Practices
- First Aid/CPR certification
- Accident Investigations

A “Public Knighting” Can Smooth the Way

Few things are harder than working alongside a co-worker one day and then telling them what to do the next. Some crewmembers just cannot resist pushing a little—or a lot—to test the authority of a fellow worker who has risen through the ranks. An upper level manager can smooth this transition by making a public announcement of the new supervisor’s position and responsibilities, and asking for support all around. This “public knighting” can go a long way toward making everyone accept a new working relationship.

