

Leadership Translates to Culture of Safety

By Joe Engberg

Working in the tree care industry, it's easy to take for granted the inherent risk of our jobs. However, recent research by the University of South Dakota reminds all of us that tree care is a dangerous business.

According to the research, tree care workers have the highest accident rate of any job for a municipality. In fact, one of the most dangerous acts you can do on the job is to remove a tree.

This sobering fact is one reason that we at The Care of Trees decided to intensify our focus on safety leadership. After years of focusing on improving our company's safety record, we had reached a consistent safety level, but we were not content with that. We wanted to find ways to get even better. "No one in our family gets hurt."

This simple sentence depicts our vision for our employee safety leadership program. We also borrowed H.O.P.E. from ArborMaster Training, as an easy way to remember how to help keep our teams safe:

- ▶ Hazards – things that can hurt us
- ▶ Obstacles – things that we can hurt
- ▶ Plan – isolate hazards, protect obstacles and get the job done
- ▶ Equipment – right equipment for the job

We use H.O.P.E. in our sales process as well as for a job briefing template.

The Care of Trees commissioned Behavioral Science Technology, Inc. (BST) in Ojai, Calif., to evaluate the company's safety leadership practices. The Care of Trees was the first tree care company to participate in the BST Strategic



Safety Leadership program, which is similar to safety programs employed by BST clients DaimlerChrysler, Johnson & Johnson and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA).

The research program entailed hundreds of focus groups, one-on-one interviews and in-depth surveys with staff members – from ground crews to upper management. Overall, the results were encouraging – The Care of Trees compared favorably to other companies in the areas of management credibility, the organization's value for safety, and employees' perception that the organization is concerned for their needs and interests.

Two areas for improvement were also identified:

- ▶ Employees' comfort level in approach-

ing others about safety

- ▶ Perception of workers regarding reporting injuries and incidents.

These are major issues that we moved to resolve immediately. We began by emphasizing to managers the importance of having risk conversations with hourly workers on the job. Managers must be strong leaders who are comfortable and competent in speaking to employees about work safety practices. For example, the manager or sales arborist at the job site can ask the crew to identify the risks they will face and how they can eliminate or avoid these risks. While the manager may know the risks associated with a particular job, initiating risk conversations clearly demonstrates that the manager wants to understand and help to address the risks that the workers face.

When leaders consistently engage workers in risk conversations, the workers are more likely to approach their coworkers on safety issues on their own. Also, because the conversations reinforce a positive relationship with the district manager, they increase the likelihood that the hourly workers will report injuries and incidents.

We strongly believe that leadership development is directly connected to a total safety culture. Every manager participated in a confidential evaluation of their leadership skills and, once they received the results back, met one-on-one with the BST consultant to interpret their results and learn ways to strengthen their skills. After the regular meetings concluded, the managers received weekly e-mail reminders about their individual leadership goals.

Of the many epiphanies we had during this process, three stood out most.

First, the most critical factor is whether your hourly workers believe you care

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The second realization was recognizing the important role of district managers in the hourly workers' experience. The district managers are the people within the company who usually have the most contact with hourly workers; they personify the company to employees. The workers' opinion of the entire company depends on their positive or negative perception of the

district manager.

Third, the effectiveness of leadership is a strong predictor of safety success. Working toward a zero-injury workplace begins with leadership throughout the entire company. By helping our management team strengthen their leadership skills, they become better performers not only in safety, but also in all aspects of our business.

Joe Engberg is field safety and education manager for The Care of Trees in Wheeling, Ill.



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