

Communication Is Key to Job-Site Safety

By Cathy Burkert

You know that saying, “What you don’t know can’t hurt you?” Guess what? IT CAN! Good communication is vital when it comes to job-site safety, productivity, and accident prevention. One of my all-time favorite sayings in my daily crew talks is “Communication is key to any successful relationship.”

There are two ways to communicate: verbally and nonverbally. An example of effective verbal communication to employees is conducting toolbox talks. Gather your crew around before, during, or after the work shift or during a break, and then make everyone aware of the potential safety hazards for the day’s operations. This is also a chance to let your field team know the goals for the day and to motivate them; but, in turn, keep them focused on the importance of job-site safety. In the toolbox meetings, it is important to communicate and document upcoming changes in the project and identify specific hazards that may arise with the changing work conditions.

When shotcrete is being placed, the use of earplugs or earmuffs often prevents personnel from using vocal communication between team members. Thus, in a high-noise environment, hand signals can be the most effective method of communication among the shotcrete crew. Use the

toolbox talks to explain various hand signals and other forms of nonverbal communication that should be used throughout the day. As a construction team performs its work, it is important for team members to communicate with each other, especially if they see something that another crew member may not. In the shotcrete work environment, this necessitates the use of both verbal and nonverbal communication.

Another crucial part of communication is active listening. Active listening is not only “hearing” what your employees are saying but also taking the time to understand what they are actually communicating. It is crucial that your employees know that you are willing to listen to their input and suggestions, particularly when it comes to safety; it is everyone’s job to take note of job-site hazards and point them out, especially ones that you may have missed. It is vitally important for teams to communicate with each other if they see a potentially unsafe condition. Ask for feedback to ensure everyone understands what you are trying to express, and let them offer suggestions on how to improve overall job-site safety. When a crew member reports or remedies a potentially unsafe condition, be sure to give them a big pat on the back in your next toolbox meeting in front



Fig. 1: Noisy job-site conditions can sometimes reduce effective communication



Fig. 2: Job-site meetings or toolbox talks are critical to informing workers of potential safety hazards

Safety Shooter

of the rest of the crew. This exemplifies that safety is everyone's job during a project. Finally, have them sign the toolbox talk worksheet to acknowledge they were actively involved in the safety process.

Safety can also be communicated indirectly in several forms. Safety signs or posters prominently posted around the job site can serve as constant reminders of the importance of safety. Keep the signs and posters clean and regularly replace or move them around the site so they are fresh and noticeable to the crew. A tattered safety sign that is covered in shotcrete overspray or dirt and barely



Fig. 3: Pre-job toolbox talks should identify daily risks. Inform workers of the safe operation and use of required tools, such as job-specific scaffolding, before work commences

legible doesn't convey the attitude that safety is a top priority. Keeping a clean, neat, and well-organized job site can also indirectly communicate an attitude that the working environment is important to both productivity and safety.

Remember, a good coach does not simply throw his starters into the game and wish them luck. It is YOUR job as a good coach to guide, teach, motivate, and listen to them and clearly and directly express to them the importance of safety.



Cathy Burkert received her bachelor's degree in business management and thereafter started working at American Concrete Restorations, a Chicago-based shotcrete contractor. She joined the laborers' apprenticeship program to learn the intricate details of the trade. After 2 years in the program, she began running her own shotcrete crews and shortly thereafter earned the title of Field Office Coordinator. In March 2009, Burkert became the first female ACI Certified Nozzleman for the wet-mix, vertical, and overhead processes. She has been involved with two award-winning ASA infrastructure projects: the Abraham Lincoln Memorial Bridge in 2008 and the Dan Ryan Expressway in 2009.