

## Safety Practices Payoff For Proactive Contractors

Being safe is paying off for roofing contractors who grab hold of the concept and apply the standards from ownership on down.

"It's well worth it," says Jeff Starkweather, president of Starkweather Roofing in Cave Creek, AZ. "It makes my workers compensation lower, I don't have accidents and I don't have lost time due to injury."

Last year, Starkweather—who chairs the Safety Committee of the Arizona Roofing Contractors Association—was honored by the Arizona Workers Compensation Bureau as being among the top five safest operations in the state's construction industry.

Starkweather pays \$1,500 monthly for a consultant who conducts four surprise job site inspections and teaches hour-long safety training sessions. Weekly toolbox talks are another part of the company's educational efforts.

"It's not really that expensive to be safe," says contractor Starkweather, whose 80 employees helped the company gross \$70 million in 2005. "It's more expensive not to do it. You have a guy get hurt, and your insurance rates go up. You have a guy get killed, and you're out of business. The main thing is getting your guys to buy into it, and that's an uphill battle."

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"It's all driven by the owner and management," observes Chris Cronin, president of **Knickerbocker Roofing and Paving Co. Inc.**, based in Harvey, IL. "A lot of it begins with attitude, and that doesn't come up from the men so much—it comes down from management."

**Knickerbocker**, a 4th generation family firm that's been in business for more than a century, emphasizes extensive employee training and properly maintained safety equipment.

"The successful, forward-thinking contractors are embracing safety because they see the benefits," Cronin contends. "We look at safety as an investment, not a cost. It pays back multiple times," he explains.

"It enhances your professional image and it instills in your employees pride in what they are doing. It controls insurance costs, and by doing that you remain competitive," Cronin continues.

"The nagging claims go away because they're much more safety aware. They have a clean work site so you're less likely to step on a nail," he says.

"If you don't comply with the safety procedures you won't be employed here long," Cronin asserts. "A lot of times that comes from worker to worker." An employee will inform a colleague that "that's not the way we do things here."

As with Starkweather in Arizona, the **Knickerbocker** safety apparatus includes unannounced third-party visits to job sites, complete with standards rivaling those of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). "It's kind of like a mock OSHA inspection," says Cronin, who has achieved "CRSP Leader" status through the Chicago Area Roofing Contractors Association (CRCA).

The CRCA/Chicagoland Roofing Safety Partnership affords an alternative to traditional OSHA enforcement procedures.

To reach CRSP Leader status:

- 1.) Contractors must have injury and illness rates at an average 10% or more below the current national average for the roofing industry.
- 2.) Contractors must have a good history with OSHA (no willful or repeat violations within a three-year period.)
- 3.) Contractors must have an experience modification rate (EMR) of 0.95 or lower, which must be on broker letterhead.
- 4.) Contractors must have a comprehensive written safety and health program in place that is equivalent to OSHA, ANSI, or the National Roofing Contractors Association (NRCA) Safety and Health Program Guidelines.

The CRCA, in cooperation with the roofer's local union, also offers surprise inspections that are included in a member firm's dues.

"Professionals and home owners are conscious of safety" when considering allowing a contractor onto their property, according to Cronin, who encourages participation in OSHA's nationwide Compliance Assistance Program.

"I would recommend that to a smaller contractor or someone in a place where consultants who know roofing are not available. It can't hurt you, and that's a plus for a contractor because it shows good faith," he advises. "OSHA finds anyone who's doing a certain amount of work" as enforcement strategies are scheduled, and "it's very important with OSHA that you show good faith and are proactive," says Cronin.

"It's one of the better things you can do, especially if you're doing public work," says Tom Shanahan, associate executive director of education and risk management at (NRCA). "Fifteen years ago I never would have recommended" that contractors approach OSHA with their safety challenges, "but now it's a good idea" for contractors to take advantage of the agency's expertise.

"It's a separate division aside from enforcement to help contractors out," says Harry Dietz, the NRCA's director of risk management. You won't be issued a citation unless something is blatantly unsafe. "It allows for an open and frank discussion of safety issues-and various safety options for a particular job-without having to worry about a citation."

No matter what the size of your business, establishing solid safety procedures is a necessity, Shanahan stresses. "Do it, document it, and do the necessary follow-up," he says.

"Do anything that keeps safety in the forefront of people's minds."

Institutional clients, large corporate operations, municipalities and other governmental bodies are demanding that bidders present a solid safety package along with product, application and financial details.

"The government sector is very critical about a company's safety program," reports Timothy M. Dunlap, president and chief operating officer of Canonsburg, PA-based CentiMark Corp., which has 2,200 employees in 55 North American branches with \$350 million in annual revenues. "That helps open those doors," he says.

CentiMark has recently obtained a \$10 million contract with NASA for hurricane-related work, "and safety was one of their focuses," Dunlap notes.

When Brian Raymore, senior vice president of safety and risk, came aboard 15 years ago "safety was not a buzzword in the roofing industry," Dunlap recalls. "We're lucky we never had any major mishaps."

At Raymore's previous roofing positions, he had been given a safety budget and told to be frugal with the funds. Upon signing on with CentiMark, however, Edward B. Dunlap, the chairman and chief executive officer, declared safety to be a top priority. "He said, 'It's safety-if you need it go buy it,'" Raymore recounts.

"As we got bigger and started to grow, we obviously saw there was a need to get our arms around a safety program," says Tim Dunlap. Nowadays, "You have problems and issues on a daily basis, but nothing extreme," he points out.

"Our customers hire us because we're safe," says Raymore. "It's made the company more profitable. Insurance premiums are lower and the lines of credit are higher because of fewer claims. Less people are missing work, and downtime due to injury is reduced.

"Insurance companies are not beating down the doors to write roofing companies' business," Raymore relates. "You need a safety program just to get insurance companies to write you," he observes.

"We feel our safety program is considerably advanced," Dunlap says. The safety program "was able to grow as the company grew. If we didn't have it, we went out and found it or Brian made it up," he reports. "We continue to fine-tune it."

"We do everything internally," Dunlap elaborates. All the workers are CentiMark employees rather than subcontractors. "Safety is part of our culture, and it's to protect our employees from getting hurt. All it would take is a large claim or the death of an employee" to have serious repercussions for the business, "more-so for a smaller company."

"We go beyond the federal regulations. We put a cable on that guy on the roof-nobody else in the industry does that," says Dunlap, who also credits the contributions of George Balch, the safety director who spends much of his time in direct contact with the workforce.

"We're very active with inspections," says Raymore. "We have 14 degreed safety people out in the field. That's their specific job; two of our safety specialists are bilingual."

"They're not just figureheads spying on our roofing crews," Dunlap emphasizes. If a job looks unsafe "they can shut it down" and dispense disciplinary measures up to suspension and ultimately dismissal.

"The roofing industry as a whole is not always safety compliant," Dunlap says. "We attract good people willing to make the same commitment we make to safety."

Raymore remarks how "there are good roofers out there who don't like to use safety," and those people are unable to obtain employment with CentiMark.