



When injuries went off the charts in Hood River County, employees changed the safety culture and reduced them almost to zero.

When injuries went off the charts in Hood River County, employees changed the safety culture and reduced them almost to zero.

Six workers' compensation claims in six weeks seemed like a lot of claims for a department of just 35 employees. Siri Christiansen was only in her first week on the job at the Hood River County Public Works Department, but that number still seemed high.

It wasn't just par for the course — it was an alarming trend for the organization. That was more than two years ago. Today, the program is turning around.

As office manager, Christiansen managed the workers' compensation claims for the department. She started asking questions and looking at the accident records with Hood River County Human Resources Director Denise Ford, trying to understand what was causing so many accidents at her new place of work.

"What we found was that safety was just not taken seriously," says Christiansen. "They had monthly safety meetings, but they didn't discuss real issues. No one even took minutes."

Making it real

The Public Works Department reorganized the safety meetings with real agendas, minutes, and more. At each meeting, attendees learned about a focused topic like ergonomics, eye safety, or bloodborne pathogens. But not all employees were convinced that safety was interesting or worth their time.

"We had to make it real—give them reasons to care," says Christiansen. "So we showed them the real costs of the claims we were having. Our timeloss costs amounted to 50 percent of a full-time employee. That money could have been better spent on pay raises."

While attending an American Public Works Association industry conference, Christiansen learned about safety incentive programs and brought the idea back to Ford. Together, they began crafting an incentive program for the department.

Ford contacted SAIF safety management consultant Dave Challburg and asked him to talk to employees about incentive programs at a departmental meeting. Challburg agreed, but

he let Ford know his message about incentive programs wouldn't be all positive. In his many years as a safety management consultant, Challburg had seen more than one incentive program fail, and he voiced his skepticism about the value of such programs to Ford. She asked him to come anyway.

At the meeting, Challburg spoke candidly about incentive programs. He provided information about why incentive programs often fail and how they can do more damage than good if implemented incorrectly. He told them that if they chose to use an incentive program, their program should focus on worker safety, promote employee involvement in injury prevention efforts, and recognize and reward good behavior.

Challburg's message helped open the lines of communication between Ford, Christiansen, and employees. They surveyed the employees to find out about their safety concerns and what incentives would motivate them.

Help me help you

"We learned a lot by talking to employees," said Christiansen. "They told us they wanted good rain gear to wear at work, and that they wanted better safety training on the job."

She asked for volunteers and Rod Pratt, Dave Larch, Cory VanSickle, and Mark Coburn II stepped up to help design a safety incentive program and to act as safety officers. The program they created included a ticket system, with team supervisors rewarding their employees weekly for safe behavior or going "above and beyond the norm." Each month, winning tickets are drawn at the department safety meetings for prizes like rain gear, utility knives, flashlights, and paid time off.

The department also started daily safety "tailgate" meetings to keep worksite safety at the top of employees' minds. Every morning, safety officers hold five-minute safety meetings in their break rooms or out on the job site to discuss the upcoming day's hazards and to recap any incidents from the day before.

The county then chose to provide personal protective equipment and train employees on how to use it. The department knew the only way to improve safety was to educate and train the workforce about the hazards at work and how to mitigate them.

Shifting the culture

"Not everyone was 100 percent behind the changes at first," says shop foreman Dave Larch. "But as the culture changes toward safety, people eventually change with it, or they go elsewhere."

The culture continues to steadily change and to improve its safety program and working habits. With a better safety record than ever before, Christiansen has to look ahead to

the next year and next steps, with help from the safety officers and employees.

"After 365 days without a time-loss accident it's time to re-evaluate and set new ideals. We can always do better. We've just got to up the ante."

Tips that work

Tailgate safety meetings

Job duties vary widely from day to day. Five minute meetings at the start of each day allow crews to discuss potential hazards caused by weather, the physical site, and the job at hand, and to work together to resolve them.

Clean up clutter

Loose cab freight can cause injury in the event of a moving vehicle accident. Custom brackets now hold tools, and crews set aside time to tidy their trucks each week. Implementing this change required clear expectations and regular inspections.

Reward improvement

Each week, safety officers give employees safety tickets for completing the work week safely. Employees can earn additional tickets for going above and beyond their duty in calling out safety hazards, or making suggestions on how to work more safely. Tickets are drawn monthly for popular items like utility knives, rain gear, and even paid time off.

Solicit feedback

The best safety programs are designed by the employees doing the work. By asking employees for suggestions and creating safety councils of employees, the department empowered its employees to own the success of their workplace safety program.