Keeping a Handle on Safety in a Chaotic Work Environment



Question: In our manufacturing facility, spring is always a very busy time. Our production schedule ramps up for about 8-10 weeks and our employees are pushed to keep up during their regular shifts, plus earn lots of overtime. During these times I have observed some workers taking shortcuts that put them and others in danger. I also worry that their attention wanes because they are more fatigued. Last, our production supervisors tend to forget that "safety comes first" and cancel safety meetings and training, just when I think the employees need them the most. What advice would you have for keeping a handle on safety in a chaotic work environment where workers are in hyper drive?

Answer: Boy, that's a recipe for disaster and if you haven't had a serious incident during one of these peak times, I think it is probably only due to luck. It is also a common problem for all industries, not just for manufacturing—many construction projects have periods of time when employees are working at a pretty quick pace due to a scheduling problem or bad weather.

While I would never argue that production trumps safety at times like these and that we simply need to learn to manage it the best we can, I also think we have to be realistic and understand that our organizations are in business to make money. These types of production increases are part of the business cycle and we need to find a way for safety and production to complement each other in a balanced manner, rather than fight each other for time and attention.

Since you know that this production cycle happens every year, I think finding ways to revise the way in which you implement your safety program may be a more effective strategy. I would suggest working with senior management to develop a plan for how to you might be able to re-think your safety focus during this peak time. Start as soon as the production schedule goes back to normal so that you are ready for the next one. Some of the ideas you might want to bring to them include the following:

Send a survey around to your employees and ask them what they think would help improve the safety focus during this time. We never fail to get great ideas from the people who are most directly affected. Sometimes we forget to ask.

- If you don't have an internal Safety Committee, get one started just after the production schedule slows. Since part of their role on the committee is to help with implementation of your safety program, by the time the production increase

rolls around again the next year, they will be ready to go. If you already have one, assign them the task of working on a list of ideas that can be delivered to management well in advance. They can even recruit some additional people to help during peak production periods. A side benefit is that you will increase the number of “eyes and ears” you have on the floor watching out for what’s happening.

- If your production supervisors are responsible for developing content for their safety meetings, consider working with them in advance to plan and prepare so that it is one less thing on their to-do list when they are under pressure. It may be that you or members of your safety committee need to deliver some of the safety meetings during this time and give the supervisors a brief respite.
- Take a look at your compliance calendar. Are there regular trainings or other safety program tasks (i.e. major program audits or site inspections) scheduled during this time? If they don’t have a regulatory deadline that requires they be completed during a certain month, shift things around so that they are done before or after. If it’s something like annual training for respirator use or lockout/tagout, move it forward so you are not out of compliance with relevant regulations.
- Keeping your employees’ heads in the game means providing frequent reminders about working safely, especially when they are distracted or fatigued. If you use safety posters, change them out before and during this time. Our brains tend to ignore things that we see all the time, but if something is different it tends to catch our eye. If you can, send out a morning email blast with a brief safety message or the result of a near miss investigation. If not, place a one page safety reminder message on the tables in the lunchroom. Keep it simple with lots of color and perhaps some photos from around the shop floor to make it relevant.
- If you aren’t doing any type of fitness program, enlist the help of a local personal trainer to develop (or even lead) some five-minute warm-up exercises that can be performed at varying times of the day. I’m not talking about a heavy work out for an already fatigued set of employees, but some brief bursts of exercise will help keep their hearts pumping and their blood flowing to fend off the fatigue they may be feeling.

Peak production is a challenge many organizations face at varying times during the year or in the life of their organization’s growth. Finding ways to balance the need for a safe workplace that also makes money is the best strategy from where I sit.

Question answered by Pam Walaski, a certified safety professional and certified hazardous materials manager, who is Regional Manager of EHS Services, Compliance Management International.