

Planning for Safety

by Gerry Sackett



By setting up a company safety program, you can prevent injuries, improve efficiency, and maybe even save money

Abrahamse & Co. employs more than 30 tradespeople; we work on projects ranging from custom homes to large office buildings and churches. But when we started in business 31 years ago, it was just three guys and a pickup truck. Like many small contractors, we were fairly relaxed about safety issues, more or less expecting everyone to take care of himself.

Over the years, as our company grew, our awareness of safety issues expanded as well: We felt we were doing a good job of following safe work guidelines. Then, in 1989, a laborer slipped off the bottom rung of a scaffold and fractured a vertebra. Even though he fell from a height of less than 2 feet, he suffered a serious spinal injury that ultimately resulted in

insurance claims of more than \$150,000.

Because we'd had a few minor claims previously, this accident was all it took for our workers' comp carrier to cancel our policies. Our costs for continued coverage went through the roof. Fortunately, we learned that these rates could be softened if we implemented a viable safety program, subject to periodic monitoring — including surprise site inspections — by an agent of the insurance provider.

Getting Started

We decided to ask one of our project managers to assume the role of safety officer. He would direct a companywide overview taking stock of where our weaknesses might lie and what improvements we should make. His most impor-

tant job was to establish a companywide culture of safety.

From the beginning our safety program has been a team effort. We told the safety officer to recruit two field workers to serve as safety coordinators; their job is to ensure that our safety policies are followed in the workplace, and they're paid extra for accepting this level of responsibility.

Working together, the three staff members drafted our "Safety Manual and Employee Handbook" (see Figure 1, next page), which clearly spells out the company's policies concerning personal-protection equipment, power tools, scaffolding, site work, and other issues of general workplace safety. Insurance companies consider such a handbook

the foundation of a viable safety program. All our employees receive a copy of this booklet, which also sets out company policy on troublesome issues like absenteeism, drugs, and sexual harassment.

Our membership in the Associated General Contractors of America (703/548-3118, www.agc.org) proved to be valuable during the drafting of our handbook; contractor groups can provide a wealth of resources for improving worker safety and health. If you're not a member of the AGC, NAHB, or the like, a Google search using the words "job-site safety" will get you more information than you need to get started.

One of the earliest tasks assigned to the safety team was to perform an assessment of all the company's tools and equipment. Anything found to be substandard was either repaired or removed from service. We got rid of all of

our wood-pole pump-jack scaffolding and replaced it with more reliable aluminum poles, planks, and guardrails. We also banned plastic fuel containers from our job sites; now we permit only spill-proof, self-closing metal containers.

As the team members assessed our tools, they also recorded their condition and location, plus scheduled maintenance or replacement dates. This tool catalog has also proved its worth on those few occasions when our sites have been burglarized, because good documentation streamlines the process of applying for insurance compensation.

Job-Site Scrutiny

Although our two safety coordinators spend the majority of their time working in the field like any other tradespeople, they're also expected to sniff out — and correct — unsafe procedures and

equipment. In addition, they're charged with conducting quarterly inspections of all electrical cords and equipment and marking them with color-coded tape in accordance with OSHA directives. This practice lets a worker (or an inspector) know at a glance whether a piece of equipment is certified to be in safe condition.

To guard against complacency, the safety coordinators periodically conduct surprise job-site inspections and submit written reports of their findings to the safety officer and the individual job supervisor.

Supervisors are critical to the success of our safety program. Each is expected to have a full understanding of how to properly erect frame-type scaffolding — including the appropriate use of guard rails and access ladders — and how to set up roof ladders and ridge-line fall-



Figure 1. A good safety manual spells out company policies on personal-protection equipment, power tools, scaffolding, site work, and the like.

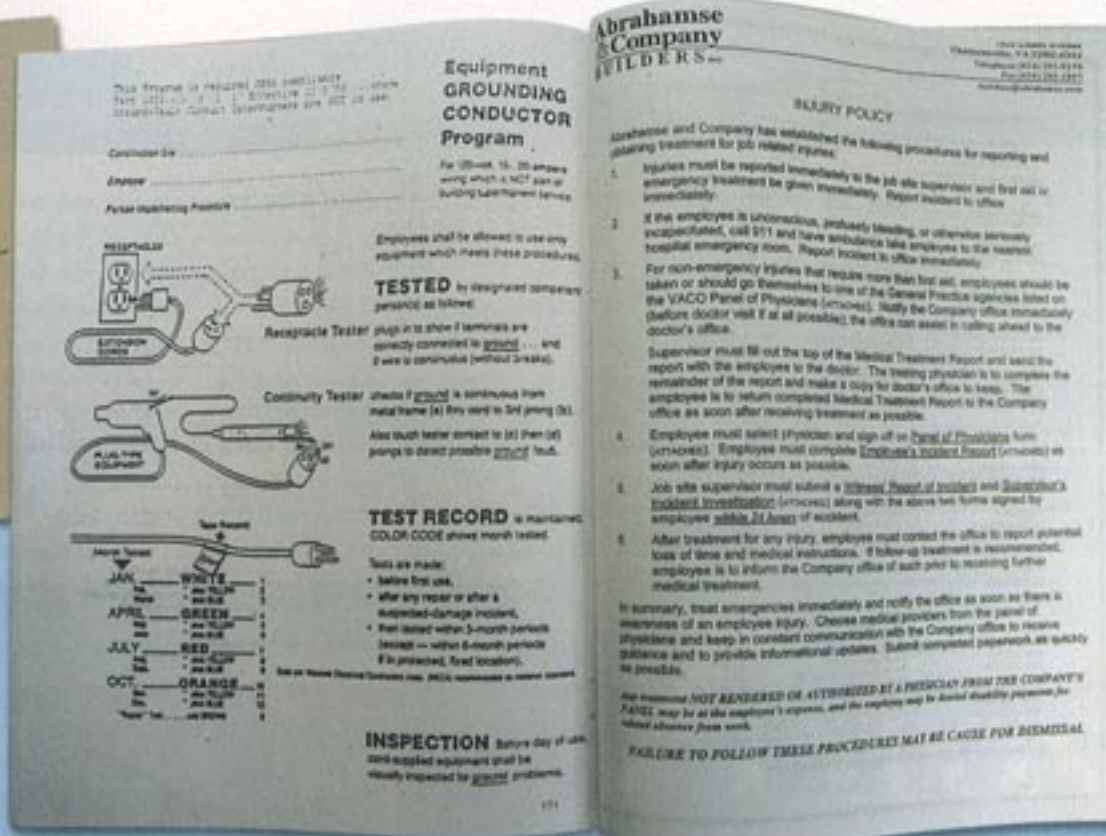
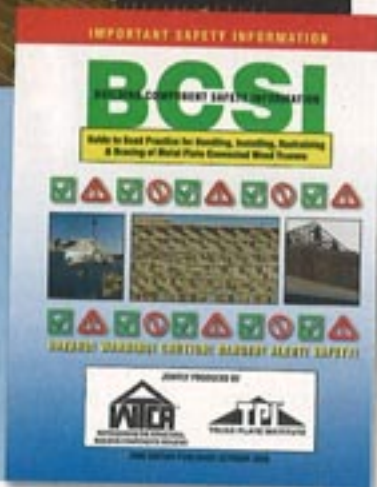




Figure 3. Produced by a consortium of truss manufacturers, the BCSI (Building Component Safety Information) guide is a good source of information on how to safely assemble these unwieldy building components.



meetings" (Figure 4). For a modest fee, we can choose from more than 400 prewritten safety meetings covering a range of subjects, including ladder safety, proper lifting, and general job-site management (877/201-8923, www.safetyservices.com). Each week a different crew member reads the lesson and then we discuss how we can apply the information in the real world.

If we've had an accident of any sort in the previous week, we forgo the canned topic and talk about the accident, exploring ways to avoid problems in the future.

Staff Buy-In

Since there's no formal apprenticeship in the building trades these days, we mine the skills and experiences that exist right under our noses by recruiting senior staff

members to provide specific training on the safe operation of dangerous tools and equipment. Beyond lessons learned, this type of mentoring fosters respect among the workers and supports the team spirit so conducive to a safe work environment and a healthy company.

To keep up with the latest safety trends and legal requirements, we've paid for a number of field workers to attend OSHA training courses and become certified as "OSHA Competent." Topics covered by the two-day course include fall protection, electrical grounding, and proper setup for ladders and scaffolding. Sending a worker through the training costs about \$200 plus wages, but the knowledge gained spreads throughout the company, making it a valuable investment.

Ultimately, no safety program can suc-

ceed without the personal involvement of every employee. A company policy, a safety manual, well-stocked first-aid kits, fully charged fire extinguishers — important as they are, these safety measures aren't worth much without the interest and participation of the people with their hands in the work. It's taken us years to get our safety program to where it is now, and it remains a work-in-progress, but we don't doubt for a minute that the effort's paid off. We have an excellent safety record. We're considered one of the best builders to work for in our region. And our workers' comp premiums are way down.

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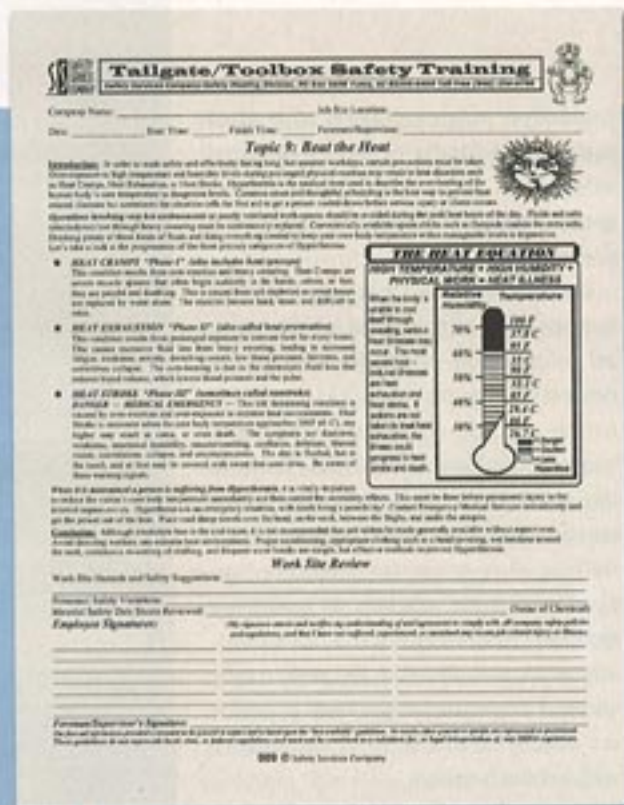


Figure 4. Available by subscription, prepackaged "toolbox safety meetings" take much of the hassle out of holding regular safety meetings. Each lesson includes space for employees to sign in, which helps provide proof that a viable safety program is in force.