

# Observing SAFETY

BY TOM SCHLAFLY

How do you make your workplace safer? Here's a start.

**IMPROVING EMPLOYEE SAFETY** in fabrication facilities is a universal goal. But how do you go about it?

The first step is to make safety routine, and one method to achieve this, practiced by many companies, is to require behavioral observation. In this method, every employee takes a short period of time to observe their coworkers' activities and submits a record of their findings. This is a key component of a behavior-based safety process.

There are different ways to go about this. One fabricator that works closely with AISC on safety issues recently asked its employees to make at least one positive statement on something going right in the company from a safety standpoint. Another company had its office staff observe safety practices in the shop. In all cases, the observers have been trained to recognize "at-risk" behavior and are told to record both the good and bad practices they observe.



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In the typical process, the observed worker(s) are told that they are being observed; they are commended for their safe behaviors and told about their at-risk behaviors with no negative implications or consequences. The employee's name is not recorded on the report, but the observation is used for analysis and shared with employees at a later time.

## Positive Reinforcement

The benefit of this process is that all employees become aware of what are considered either safe or at-risk behaviors. The observed employees

receive positive reinforcement for safe behaviors and become aware of at-risk behaviors, hopefully leading to a safer response. From there, safety becomes a routine part of shop practices. The short time spent becomes an investment rather than a burden.

The above observations were developed as part of a bigger program, but in and of themselves can be a tool to raise awareness and make employees know that everyone is responsible for safety. They can be used to analyze shop at-risk behaviors and develop improved methods.

How does this work in practice? We had an opportunity to scan observations from one of our member fabricators and noticed something. The at-risk observations were all about perceived unsafe conditions and there were few, if any, recordings of unsafe acts. This highlights the reality that the workforce is uncomfortable reporting on their peers. It indicates a need for more work, and this tendency at least needs to be accounted for if not completely eliminated.

The goals are zero accidents and zero incidents. To achieve those goals, proactive methods need to be routinely implemented. There will be lessons learned as an observation process is implemented.

### Timing is Everything

It is crucial to make safety observations at different times of the day. At the beginning of the day, observe the conditions in the shop and note differences from previous observations. Are there tripping hazards? Are all the guards in place?

One of the characteristics of structural fabrication shops that is different from other types of manufacturing facilities is that the work space and equipment can change to suit the project. Those changes make us able to produce the variety of pieces required for each project. This may also introduce hazards that might not be found in a more stable manufacturing arrangement. When work areas are relocated, do they block exits or extinguishers? Did they block electrical shut-off panels? Are adjacent workers reasonably protected from arc radiation? Have we maintained separation between flammable products and ignition sources?

Other observations should be made near the end of the day. Is there a job hazard analysis (JHA) for the work being performed? Does the JHA cover the procedure being performed? Is the worker conforming to the procedure? Have consumables, scrap and production pieces accumulated in the work space to create hazards?

Encourage your observers to develop useful observations and suggest ways to make conditions and behaviors in the shop safer. Change the process occasionally. Go in as individual observers. Go in teams. Make observations in different areas of the shop. Pick a focus such as storage, tool conditions, personal protective equipment (PPE) use or ergonomic conditions and improvements. Observe various aspects of safety such as electrical safety, safe walking and working surfaces and safe hoisting equipment condition and use.

Whether you choose to use these guidelines or others to make behavior-based safety observations, we hope you continue to look for ways to improve safe behavior in the shop and the field. If you have ideas, we want to hear them! Feel free to email me at [schlafly@aisc.org](mailto:schlafly@aisc.org). ■