From vulnerable to transformational

Waiward Steel hit an all-time low in 2012.
The leading steel fabrication and industrial construction firm had a string of workplace accidents from 2010 to 2012, with the last resulting in devastating facial injuries. A Waiward employee near Fort McMurray, Alberta, was struck in the back of the head by a headache ball that was being lowered by a crane, which pushed his face into a gusset plate. Thankfully, the worker survived and returned to work, but he still deals with chronic pain, and is enduring multiple reconstructive surgeries.

This life-altering injury scarred the company. “The incident could easily have been a fatality,” admits Jim Kanerva, Waiward’s Chief Operations Officer. “We had over 140 ironworkers on-site and we were shut down for weeks. It cost us over a million dollars in profit and loss of reputation. Other companies lost money because of us during the site-wide shutdown. No one can afford that.”

Yet the Edmonton, Alberta, firm had an award-winning safety program that was compliant with construction, manufacturing and government safety legislation, policies and regulations.

Suddenly, Kanerva and the company’s President, Terry Degner, realized that having thick binders filled with pages of procedures meant little if employees were still getting hurt. In 2012, Waiward had a lost-time injury every 122,000 hours; unfortunately, that was not the worst in the industry.

Taking a competency approach

Waiward examined its culture, vision, and values, and decided to develop an employee competency management system. What this meant for the company was if workers can’t do the job, train them, with a focus on training at the work front.

The company developed a software tool (MODOS) to help manage the competency management system, including developing competency profiles for each position in the company. The profiles list all the tasks that cover an entire position. “It doesn’t matter whether it’s safety, quality, production, schedule, or understanding the vision and values of the company,” Kanerva said.

Waiward rates new and current employees based on those competencies. If employees are assessed and given the rating “needs training,” the company happily provides on-the-job training, witnesses the training to ensure competence, provides them the safe-work procedures, and will bring in a third-party certification if needed.

“If we circle ‘needs training,’ it means that person needs to know how to do that task for the job they have right now. It’s not like an apprentice who might be learning these things over years,” Kanerva said. He notes training is not a punishment; it’s investing, it’s the culture of the company.

Waiward is now nearing five million hours without a lost-time injury. “We’re very proud of that number,” says Kanerva. “We’re not a big company so we don’t generate hours quickly. We were nowhere near this number in our entire history up to 2012.”

He adds that, “if you train your workforce well enough, the quality, productivity, and schedule are going to improve too.”

Waiward’s comprehensive safety management system has been so successful that it started a sister company called MODOS Performance Solutions LP. The MODOS management software tracks, in detail, the experience, training, and certifications of a company’s employees. It can also track gaps in training, information on mentoring sessions, how prepared an employee will be for a specific working condition, and more.

Beyond Waiward

Waiward’s approach to safety is being recognized in the industry. Some companies have taken their competency approach, but not enough companies have taken it far enough, says Janet Lane, Director of the Human Capital Centre at Canada West Foundation. “It is relatively new to Canada. It’s something that has been in place for many years in Britain and the European Union. The United States is working towards this as well,” Lane says.

Canada West Foundation truly believes in Waiward’s competency approach. The independent, non-partisan public policy think tank published a paper in May 2017 that recommends that employers adopt a competency approach to workforce development. Beyond the Rules: Moving Safety from Compliance to Competence notes that across Canada in 2015, 307 workers died from injuries on the job and 545 people died from work-related diseases. That same year, 232,629 people filed lost-time claims through Workers’ Compensation Boards, which equals one-and-a-half claims for every 100 workers covered by compensation boards, the report states.

“What Waiward’s story can tell us is one of the ways people can still get hurt is by assuming they’re competent in the entirety of their position, although they may not actually be competent in the task of the job they’re doing that day, or they may not have done it under the conditions in which they are required to do it that day,” says Lane. “Every company has the big, fat safety binder. Every company has a safety program, and
How one company's experience is helping to shift construction's safety culture from reactive to proactive

Many employers have the certificate of recognition that says, "Yes indeed, you're following all the rules." But it's not enough because people still get hurt."

While examining Waiward Steel's competency approach, Canada West Foundation discovered seven factors that will determine success if this competency approach to workforce development and deployment is taken.

The factors are:
1. **Commitment**: Top leadership must have an unwavering commitment to this approach to safety.
2. **Consistent leadership**: All leaders must be on board.
3. **Coordination**: Someone must be responsible for developing and implementing the competency approach program.
4. **Coaching**: Assistance from the competency administrator or other leaders helps everyone adapt to the changes.
5. **Champions**: Local champions in the company who spread the word about the program at work and outside of the company can ease the transition.
6. **Communication**: The company needs to make clear to employees why the competency management program is being implemented, how the program will be rolled out, and must provide updates on progress.
7. **Continuous learning**: Training and development needs to become part of the company's culture.

Companies that adopt this approach may not do it perfectly, which is understandable since it's hard to run a business, manage employees, and change an approach to safety. For Waiward, the struggle was with its internal communication about the competency program.

"Yes, it does take effort, commitment, coaching and training, and coordination that goes beyond what is normally in place, but the payoff in having safer employees is amazing," Lane says.

Another remarkable part of Waiward's story was that they accomplished this with the full co-operation of the Ironworkers Union. Canada West Foundation's paper, The Skill Advantage: The 21st Century Challenge for Canada's Unions, suggests unions also adopt a competency approach and dispatch workers who have the right competencies to do the jobs.

"Moving to a competency management approach would be valuable for the whole construction sector, including everyone involved in the construction workforce," Lane says.

**By the numbers: safety perceptions**

The first "C" in the seven-step approach to competency management is commitment. That means an unwavering commitment to this approach to safety.

Upper management, however, is lacking when it comes to choosing between production and costs versus safety, according to a recent survey by the Construction Owners Association of Alberta (COAA). The survey had 1,294 respondents, the majority of them were permanent male employees ages 40 to 49 whose companies are members of COAA.

The results found that less than 40 percent of respondents feel that leadership makes safety the highest priority. Only about 32 percent of respondents answered that leadership walks the talk – that safety is a priority and they have the necessary systems in place.

The purpose of the survey, called Safety Maturity Curve: Findings from Industry Perception Survey, was to build upon safety improvements in the industry. COAA embarked on its goal of "Twice as Safe, Twice as Productive by 2020" to put more emphasis on safety among Alberta's construction companies. Since that time, the total recordable injury rates have dropped from 1.6 to 0.7, which is less than half of what it was in 2014.

"This is a safety perception survey, so leaders may feel like they're prioritizing safety, but if they're not communicating that regularly and consistently to employees, then employees may not
necessarily get the messaging that it is in fact their priority,” explains Dr. Lianne Lefsrud, an Assistant Professor in Engineering Safety and Risk Management in the Department of Chemical and Materials Engineering at the University of Alberta, and principal investigator for the survey and May 2017 report. Dr. Lefsrud also notes that respondents’ companies had better safety performance than the overall industry average.

The survey considered each company’s safety maturity journey, which has five levels – the least mature is vulnerable, then reactive, compliance, proactive, and then transformational is the most mature.

“We found that most companies were in the middle of the safety maturity journey, from compliant to proactive,” notes Dr. Lefsrud.

From reactive to proactive
Companies that are simply compliant with safety regulations aren’t doing enough, according to Patrick Dillon, Business Manager and Secretary Treasurer of the Provincial Building and Construction Trades Council of Ontario. “Prevention, not pretension, should be the number one interest that the contractor and the worker should have. If they do, lives will be saved and lost-time injuries will be eliminated.”

Dillon believes that employers need to have – and believe in – zero tolerance, noting that if workers aren’t complying with safety regulations and procedures, they should be disciplined. “There’s a range of policies you could put in place, but if they’re put in place and they’re not enforced, that is a form of pretension and you won’t get the best results,” he says. “Employers have to enforce safety practices rigidly if they want to change employee behaviour.”

It is incredibly important for a workplace’s safety culture to be encouraged from the top down, he stresses. One of the issues in the industry, Dillon says, is that, “generally, foremen pick the people for layoffs, and way too often, they pick the person who they find to be a pain because they raise health and safety issues. Workers compete with one another every day for work and most believe that if they raise health and safety concerns, they will be on the next list of layoffs; it’s just a reality.”

“When we speak of culture change, that is the number one change that needs to take place – workers need to be encouraged by the company’s leadership to speak up,” he says.

One solution, Dillon suggests, is for employers to compensate employees who raise legitimate health and safety concerns. “The workers who bring forward a safety concern – which is in everybody’s best interest – should be given an incentive for doing that.”

“This sets an example for the rest of the workplace, which contributes to changing the culture,” says Dillon.

While there is room to improve health and safety in the industry, safety has come a long way. Historically, construction workers were seen as a means to an end. Now, technology and regulations have helped develop safety in the industry, and companies think about risk.

Jim Kanerva’s experience at Waiward Steel has given him a first-hand understanding of the importance of real safety management systems that go beyond binders full of procedures collecting dust on the shelf.

“If a company truly cares about its people, caring about their safety and implementing the procedures to ensure their safety is the best way to show it,” believes Kanerva.

Anyone interested in learning more about a competency approach to management is encouraged to contact Jim Kanerva, Waiward Steel’s Chief Operations Officer (and Managing Director of MODOS Performance Solutions LP) at jim.kanerva@waiward.com or (780) 722-6543.

FACT:
Creating an incident-free culture
Waiward was so successful with its safety improvements that a sister company was created to design a software that takes competency monitoring and tracking to the next level. MODOS is that software. It stores specs on every employee’s competency, has a six-stage rating scale (from Not Suitable to Mentor Competence), and details everyone’s work experience.

Learn more at www.modos.ca.