

Barhale Construction plc

Worker engagement case study 8

This case study is part of a series of case studies, which give examples of best practice when engaging workers to improve health and safety in the workplace.

Introduction

In 1999 Barhale identified the need to focus resources on the front line, where site team members were exposed to risk, and where the majority of accidents occur. So, along with a series of initiatives to improve two-way communication with its workforce, the company introduced the safety coach.

The safety coach

Safety coaches have played an increasingly important role in developing a positive safety culture. Take the example of Charlie Martin, safety coach in Barhale's eastern region.

Charlie's job is to regularly visit the five or so sites he has responsibility for. This is not an office job, Charlie's time is spent on site, walking the job, talking to the men, observing and providing advice, support and occasional correction. He has no management responsibilities, no forms to fill in and does not report individuals to management. Having done a range of safety training, Charlie understands the standards required on site. He prides himself on being able to correct poor working practice by talking to the men, winning their co-operation and respect and demonstrating himself how the job should be done. Safety coaches ask rather than tell, using their experience and personality to win hearts and minds.

Managers value the unique role the safety coach plays, providing a link between the site or contract manager and the workforce. Issues are often raised through a safety coach that individuals might not feel able to raise themselves. The role makes no distinction between employees or subcontractors, all benefit from the safety coach's input.

Robert Wiles, a Barhale groundworker, tells a story that illustrates the value of the safety coach: '18 months ago I was part of a gang preparing vacuum manholes. We had to go down shafts up to 1.5 m deep. On this occasion, the last one of the day, we put a gas detector down the shaft – it beeped – low oxygen, we couldn't believe it. The other lads wanted to

Company fact file

Barhale is a leading civil engineering and infrastructure services contractor in the UK, with an annual turnover in the region of £120 million.

The company provides a broad range of quality services including construction and refurbishment of client-owned assets. It has a significant input into feasibility and design to provide value-engineered solutions for below-ground infrastructure such as pipelines and cables, and above-ground structures including water and wastewater treatment, bridges and rail construction work. The core business units are supported by specialist plant, tunnelling, fabrication and process divisions providing a single source of supply for the client.

Much of the company's workload consists of long-term partnering arrangements, using its directly employed workforce of 1200 staff. At any one time, only 10-15% of the Barhale workforce will be subcontracted labour.



Figure 1 Charlie Martin (left) with groundworker Robert Wiles

crack on, believing the detector was faulty, but I said: "No, remember what Charlie says". So we fetched another meter – same result, oxygen was very low; we had to purge the shaft. I reckon that advice saved my life.'

Improving communication

Regular **Toolbox Talks** are held at site level. They have a flexible structure, but sites conduct at least two a month: one generated corporately (reflecting a theme or specific significant issue) and one generated at site level (reflecting a specific site issue).



Figures 2 and 3 Charlie Martin with workers on site

Safety alerts are used to highlight injuries and incidents, and to learn from these incidents. Barhale often uses alerts from clients and partners to highlight issues that the company can learn from but has not directly experienced. Safety alerts are also issued to partners, subcontractors and clients.

The Safety Focus, Barhale’s quarterly internal safety newsletter, is sent to all employees with their payslips. It contains news, details of good practice, incidents, accidents and areas of potential risk within Barhale and its wider supply chain. Circulation now includes clients, subcontractors and other stakeholders.

Breakfast briefings are held on site – weekly on the lower risk sites and every morning on higher risk sites to:

- review and communicate changes in site conditions, public safety, traffic, ground conditions, existing buried and overhead services, weather conditions etc on a regular basis – to ensure that risk assessments and method statements are still relevant and to avoid complacency in repetitive situations; and
- monitor site health and safety performance and encourage involvement and feedback from the workforce on any specific concerns, any improvements they can propose, and to capture any information on near misses or dangerous occurrences.

Briefings also highlight and prepare for any ‘abnormal’ activities due to happen on site that day, eg deliveries, large numbers of visitors or the arrival of specialist equipment.

The SP programme

Barhale has recently introduced ‘Safe People – Safe Place’, – the ‘SP’ programme, involving:

- observation (currently by safety coaches);
- discussion, with the aim of preventing injuries;
- immediate reinforcement of safe behaviour;
- discussion of the consequences of unsafe behaviour;
- promoting ownership by the individual;
- trends identified through a database.

The SP programme is not a hazard-spotting exercise, it is about observing individuals, then engaging with the employee and drawing out their behaviour, and why.

The aim is to identify trends in behaviour across the business and rectify and shortfalls. The company believes that for every disabling injury there are normally 30 reportable injuries and about 300 minor injuries, and an estimated 30 000 unsafe acts and near misses. If you can identify the causes (the unsafe acts and near misses at the base of the pyramid) you can prevent them from combining and so prevent the potential for more serious incidents to occur.

The results

- Barhale’s accident frequency rate has dropped by 75% since December 1999. The same period has seen the man hours worked each month triple.
- In the eastern region, the last RIDDOR-reportable accident occurred two and a half years ago.
- Client satisfaction – Horace Lee, Clerk of Works for Anglian Water, comments: ‘Barhale were one of the first contractors considered for a role in the long-term alliance. They make my life easy, constantly demonstrating high standards in safety, workmanship, materials and liaison with the public.’
- Staff retention – 60% of all staff in the eastern region have been employed for three years or more.

Dennis Curran, Chairman of Barhale Construction, states: ‘The excellent safety record is due to the hard work of everyone on site and in the offices, and I am proud of the gains that have been made. The company’s aim is to have a zero accident culture in place where people do not put themselves at risk. As the downward accident trend continues at Barhale, the challenge now is to maintain our sharp focus on safety and the underlying causes of injuries and incidents.’