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EMPOWERING SAFETY AT THE PROJECT LEVEL

The prerequisites for success at the construction project level are diligence, ingenuity, and doing the right thing.

“Empowering safety at the project level” involves all of these leadership traits which further the success and safe completion of any construction project.

Since the safety movement gained momentum during the late 1940s, safety, health, and environmental (SHE) practitioners have been espousing the role of the supervisor/foreman as the “Key Man” in preventing accidents. Many books, papers, and articles have been written about the key man over the years but until as late as 1992 not many people in the construction industry were reading or listening. Hence, the supervisor/foreman has been an under-utilized resource in the battle to stem the tide of debilitating employee injuries and deaths in the workplace.

What happened in 1992? As a result of the dramatic loss numbers released by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) relating to the construction industry from 1985 through 1989 and higher workers’ compensation rates across the country, leaders from organized labor and the construction SHE practice put their collective heads together to find a remedy. The Construction Divisions of the National Safety Council (NSC) and the American Society of Safety Engineers (ASSE) both of which included members of the Associated General Contractors of America (AGC) Safety and Health Committee approached the Board of Certified Safety Professionals (BCSP) and asked if accredited certifications could be created to help upgrade the level of SHE practice at the construction project level. The idea met with overwhelming approval and the creation of the Construction Health and Safety Technician® (CHST)

and Safety Trained Supervisor (STS) certification began. This work culminated with the initial CHST certification examinations being administered in October 1994. The first STS examinations were administered during March 1995. The table was now set for the amazing return of the under-utilized supervisor/foreman.

Since the safety emphasis began to be restored to the supervisor/foreman at the project level in 1995, many contractors have realized a renewal and strengthening of project leadership and their business/safety cultures.

For years, safety has typically been treated as a stand-alone program owned and run by a safety department. Construction company safety departments have worked hard to get results and often gain the upper hand, but inevitably the program plateaus because of what most safety programs suffer from—dealing with trailing indicators (e.g., accidents, OSHA inspections, insurance loss control audits, changes in OSHA standards, etc.) Some of the interventions involve writing stronger contract safety addendums for subcontractors or modifying safety programs, emphasizing certain parts of a program, setting priorities, training or retraining workers, conducting more hazard inspections, and providing incentives or enforcing the disciplinary program. Many of these efforts work, but they do not achieve lasting results. Poor safety outcomes can be attributed to a failure to plan the work with safety in mind. Construction projects are dynamic and changing constantly. Controlling workers, material, and equipment requires planning. A project manager would never run a project without a plan. Safety has to be a managed process just like everything else at the project level.

To create an injury-free workplace, construction operations must own safety and safe work practices.

The supervisor/foreman is now the “Key Person” with the opportunity to impact safe work planning involving direct oversight of the men and women doing the work. For this reason, getting the project safety program into the hands of the people who observe the workforce daily is where the change begins. The successes then start to make the production process better and safer. Thus, the project-level safety initiative becomes a leading indicator because supervisors/foremen can affect change before unsafe acts and hazardous conditions occur. When the unsafe process does not take place, the accidents/incidents decrease dramatically.

Can foremen be expected to do this intuitively? Foremen gain status by being good at their job as “craftspersons.” The craftsperson must be good at the trade, be self-directed, show initiative, and be a problem solver. They also need additional skills (e.g., planning, organizing, controlling, administering, some know how in human relations, and knowledge of SHE rules and what safe work practices are supposed to look like). Only a small number of foremen have the ability to make this transition. With a little education and some practical training, guidance, mentoring, coaching, and support, the foreman can make a difference on a lot of issues at the project level—with safety being one of the issues needing the most attention on almost all projects. It has been the norm for many years that if the project is clean and safe then it is usually close to budget and the schedule is tracking close to prediction.

So, how did the creation of a supervisor safety certification have this impact?

Some of the likely factors brought together from the project-level supervisor/foreman owning the safety program include:

- Top management commitment to safety
- Providing a leading indicator for safety
- Team building/crew strengthening
- Enhanced leadership at the project level
- Workgroup involvement in safety
- Workgroup empowerment

- Self-improvement
- Self-esteem and pride
- Measurement and continuity of safety knowledge
- Continued safety learning
- Effective safety communication
- Understanding where to get assistance
- Individual and company incentives and recognition
- Affected supervisors/foremen/crew leaders advance quicker in their career paths
- Ability to compete where certification is specified in contracts

In addition to employees, employers receive benefits from empowering safety at the project level. These include:

- Improved reputation
- Improved business/safety culture
- Reduced lost time injury/illness rates
- Reduced workers’ compensation premiums
- Improved quality and productivity
- More timely resolution of safety problems at the project level
- Reduced dependence on full-time safety specialists for project-level safety problems

Bottom line? It works.

The STS certification was created by construction SHE professionals and is nationally-accredited. There is nothing magical about it. So, why should contractors support it and individuals achieve it? After earning certification, a certificant has also earned the right to say four things—the first two from **competence** and the final two from **confidence**:

1. *“I know my safety-related responsibilities.”*
2. *“Management realizes that I know my safety-related responsibilities.”*
3. *“I am willing AND able to carry out my safety-related responsibilities.”*
4. *“Management supports me AND expects me to carry out my safety-related responsibilities.”*

Improved outcomes result from tenacity, innovation, and vigilance—all practiced by great contractors!

References

Furst, P.G., The Injury-Free Construction Site and the Foreman: An Underutilized Resource in the Safety Process. IRMI – Expert Commentary, 2007

CCHEST, The Alchemy of Mettle: Factors Involved in the STS Certification Effectiveness, White Paper, 2007