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Safety Seconds
columns feature ideas
and topics that help
employees work safer.

SAFETY CHALLENGE: DEALING WITH THE CHRONIC VIOLATOR

As we all know, our mushroom workers are our companies' greatest assets, however, challenges exist in dealing with those workers who are repeat or chronic safety violators.

There's the employee who reports reliably to work every day and is eager to do a good job, but is constantly taking unnecessary risks. Another worker is an excellent harvester but often gets hurt because they don't follow company safety rules.

How Do You Handle Chronic Safety Violators?

Before we look at how to deal with chronic safety violators, it's important to examine how companies address safety overall. When this question was posed recently to the Mushroom Employee Safety and Health (MESH) Committee, many members commented that developing a safety culture should be the number one priority for every company, and that this happens only when top down management "walks the safety talk."

So, why is it important that safety begins at

the top? Because companies that have a well-established safety culture are usually more efficient, more productive and generally more motivated than those companies who do not value safety.

"Workplace safety should be addressed in the same way that food safety is addressed – a high priority and a significant issue," said Meghan Klotzbach, regulatory manager, Mother Earth Organic Mushrooms.

It is well known that we are all experiencing a labor shortage, where finding and keeping competent labor might cause some to hold on to chronic safety violators longer than they may otherwise want to. Perhaps a supervisor sees a safety infraction but decides not to document the incident for fear of losing this worker. Is that safe?

"It may work for a while but safety is directly

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related to production, quality and costs,” said Rick Wright, Director of Safety, To-Jo Mushrooms. “An unsafe employee will cost you money in the long run. Strong safety programs and noble safety committees hold every member of your staff accountable.”

Most companies have policies where safety incidents need to be documented with warnings then issued. This is critical in handling unsafe behaviors. Once an issue is noted, then actions can be taken with the worker to correct their unsafe behaviors and thus prevent an incident from occurring in the future.

At South Mill Mushrooms, we work with all of our employees in correcting unsafe behaviors. An incident review panel has been instituted for reviewing OSHA reportable incidents. Owners and management collectively meet with the employee to discuss the incident in order to better understand exactly what happened. Then practical solutions can be identified in order to prevent the incident from happening again. This exercise is not punitive, but provides a positive way for management to engage the workforce in addressing how incidents can be prevented from happening in the first place. Workers end up owning the issue and are thus invested in fixing the problem. The incident

review panel meeting also lets the workers see that ownership is personally committed to reducing workplace accidents.

There are some safety rules which are so important that South Mill initiated a program of “Progressive Discipline” to deal with repeat offenders of these rules. An example of this is our “*Seat Belt Policy*,” which says that seat belts must be worn by all drivers as well as their passengers who drive vehicles owned or leased by South Mill on public roads and operators of all “off-road” equipment (forklifts, loaders, tractors, etc.). We follow a progressive discipline policy that includes:

- ▶ **1st Offense** – Verbal reprimand
- ▶ **2nd Offense** – Written reprimand
- ▶ **3rd Offense** – Three days suspension without pay
- ▶ **4th Offense** – Termination

Additionally, sometimes it may be necessary to transfer the unsafe employee to another department altogether which actually may be a safer area for that employee to work.

When it comes to workplace safety, it’s not just a single department issue. At South Mill, the safety department works closely with Iris Ayala, our human resources director, and departmental managers when dealing with workplace safety offenders. It’s a collaborative effort where we work together to determine what needs to be done to help these employees to work more safely.

Ultimately, safety is our most important value, thus owners, management and workers themselves cannot tolerate employees who do not take it seriously.

The very future of all of our companies depends on a safe and productive workforce. *mn*



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