

Week of March 21, 2011 – Ladder Safety and Using the Right Tool for the Job, Management Commitment to Safety and Everything Else!

So there I was, there I was...in the Congo! No, no, actually I was at the Albuquerque Airport waiting for a plane. I was watching two maintenance workers performing patch work on a wall between a Baskin-Robins and a bookstore (When is “The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet’s Nest” coming out in paperback?!). Because the work required access to elevated locations, a seven-foot fold-out step ladder was used. I noticed that the spreaders were fully extended, providing stability, while the one worker that was on the ladder used the three-point-of-contact practice (i.e. both feet properly situated on rungs while one hand holding on to another part of the ladder) while adding plaster to the damaged wall surfaces; afterwards applying paint to those areas needing touch-up. The second worker was supporting the ladder by holding on to both its leg sections. While I watched the two workers I thought to myself, “Now, here is a picture of how work on a ladder should be performed.” No sooner than that thought entered my mind, I saw the worker that on the ladder elevate himself to the top platform so that he could get to a hard-to-reach spot. Although his helper still supported the ladder, the worker was placing himself in harm’s way. His balance was compromised and he could no longer use the safe practice of three-point contact. A fall from that height could result in a very serious injury.

I couldn’t help myself. Being a Safety and Health guy I had to go over and say something. True, I was a little hesitant as this was not my job. But then again, I’m the one that’s always espousing the importance of safety and that when someone looks the other way when they notice an unsafe act or doesn’t speak up, we cannot claim innocence in the event that the unsafe act manifests into an accident. We saw something wrong and chose to do nothing. We had the chance to stop someone from getting hurt. This is not acceptable for anybody, let alone a safety professional. That did it! I convinced myself to take the proactive step. Even if I was told to go take a hike, at least I know I stepped up to the plate and spoke up for safety. So I meandered over to the two workers in my most nonchalant and inconspicuous manner (I think I was humming “I Got Rhythm”). The workers were no longer using the ladder as they were cleaning up the area. It was properly folded and placed against a wall. Inspecting the ladder, I noticed its condition was quite satisfactory and the warning labels were intact and legible – written in both English and Spanish. Since it was metal (aluminum) there was a warning informing users not to use this tool for electrical work. I also noticed the warning of “Never Stand on the Top Two Rungs” (these guys were using the top platform – even worse). I continued to inspect the ladder while giving occasional glances to the workers; my subtle attempt to let the workers know that I was observing them.

After a while, I caught the attention of one of the workers. I watched him come over, showing an inquisitive look on his face. I immediately apologized for being so nosy and then proceeded to explain that I was a S&H type-of-guy and that I couldn’t help but notice the dangerous practice that was being used. No sooner than I finished, the worker called over to his buddy. When he

came over, the first worker asked me to repeat what I told him. After humbly apologizing and explaining myself – again – the two workers looked at each other and then back at me and began to laugh. The second worker then spoke.

“The boss is too tight. He won’t get another ladder that reaches higher.”

I thought that a scissor-lift would have been more appropriate for their work. I mentioned that and I received the same response. “The boss is too tight.”

That didn’t surprise me. After all, if the boss wouldn’t buy a ladder, a scissor lift would have been out-of-the-question. But I needed to respond.

“Yeah, but if someone gets hurt, whether it’s you or someone else, or just a person passing by, he will be paying a lot more than what a ladder costs.” I could have talked about the hidden costs of an accident – stop work, legal ramifications, a poor reputation that could negatively impact future contracted work, etc, as well as mentioning that “If it ain’t safe, don’t do it,” but I wasn’t interested in placing myself in the middle of a labor conflict or starting a worker revolt at the airport. After all, I made my point, spoke my mind, and warned them of their dangerous work practice.

We parted on good terms and, hopefully, I was able to plant a seed of safety consciousness into both of them. That alone might be enough for them to notice that whenever they are about to do something unsafe they will think twice before placing themselves at risk. The bottom line is that everyone has the right to go to work, perform their assigned work tasks and go home in the same condition they started the day (albeit a little more tired). On occasions that may mean speaking up when we see someone placing themselves in an unsafe situation. I suppose that is what is meant by the saying, “SAFETY: It’s everyone’s business.”

May the sun always shine on your windowpane; May a rainbow be certain to follow each rain; May the hand of a friend always be near you; May God fill your heart with gladness to cheer you.

Irish Blessing