

TerranearPMC Safety Share

Week of November 28, 2011 – Tailgate Meetings and the Importance of Fundamentals

(The Continuing Saga of Ethyl Mercaptan: Safety and Health Professional)

Ethyl Mercaptan was busy. She was tabulating the company's safety and health statistics when out of nowhere, she heard a deep sigh coming from across the room. It was Bill. Bill was one of the company's Site Safety Officers. The unexpected sound broke her concentration. Feeling a little exasperated, Ethyl lifted her head and turned towards Bill. She worked with him long enough to know that this was Bill's way of getting her attention. Realizing her cue, she decided that it would be best to respond. Otherwise there would soon follow a string of sighs and moans that would result in increasing loudness until the inevitability that she would have no choice but to finally make an inquiry.

"OK Bill, sounds like you're in the middle of a drama. What's up?"

Before Bill spoke, he let out another sigh and then began, "I've got to come up with a safety topic for tomorrow's tailgate meeting and the project manager wants me to talk about the proper use of hand tools."

"Sounds like a good topic. What's the problem?"

"You're kidding me! These guys have been doing their job for years, working with all sorts of hand tools. They are experts with this stuff. What can I possibly tell them that they don't already know?"

Ethyl nodded in understanding. She then gave a sympathetic smile.

"Let me tell you a story about a good friend of mine. He's a pianist."

Bill sounded confused. "A pianist? A PIANIST!? What does that have to do with operating a sawz?"

Ethyl raised her right hand to ward off the potential verbal assault. "Let me explain." Bill relaxed and then she continued.

"Yes, my friend is a pianist and NO, he did not moonlight as a laborer; but he once told me a story that left quite an impression on me."

With a slight hint of sarcasm in his voice, Bill responded. "I'm all ears. Please proceed."

Ethyl gave a smirk and continued. "My friend, Andy, is a great musician and he currently teaches piano and music theory at the University. But when he was younger, he had the incredible honor to meet the great Van Cliburn."

"Who!?"

"Harvey Lavan Cliburn, known throughout the world simply as 'Van Cliburn'. He is considered to be one of the premier pianists of all time. He was born in Shreveport, Louisiana, but grew up in Texas where he developed his talent. When he was 24 years old Van Cliburn was invited to play in Moscow at the

International Tchaikovsky Piano competition. It was 1958 and it was the height of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. It was the very first such competition and was actually established by the Soviets to demonstrate their cultural superiority. As it turns out Van Cliburn won it but the judges were so afraid to give the award to an American that they went to the Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, to ask permission. Khrushchev responded to the judges by saying if the American Played the best, then he should get the prize.”

Bill shrugged his shoulder and spoke. “Nice story, but what does that have to do with my current dilemma?”

Ethyl continued. “I want you to understand that Van Cliburn was quite the piano expert. Well, my old friend, Andy, when he met Van Cliburn, it was part of a masters seminar for a select group of piano players. It was during this seminar that Andy had the opportunity to observe Van Cliburn’s technical approach toward his instrument, including how he practiced. Well, Andy explained to me that when Van Cliburn first sat down at the piano, he just didn’t start playing; No way! The first thing he did was to place all his fingers on the keys, in proper position and to gently press each individual key, barely making the note sound. He started with his left pinky, then the left ring finger and continued this process for all fingers. This was followed by playing scales very slowly. For the next hour, all he did was play scales and other types of warm-up exercises. He didn’t even start playing actual music until after about two hours!”

Ethyl could see that Bill was still confused, so she felt that she needed to get to the point.

“You see, Bill, what I am trying to point out is that even the great musicians need to first ensure that they have mastered the fundamentals before they move to more challenging and sophisticated music. They even need to go over the fundamentals every day. Otherwise, they will not be able to maintain such a high level of technical ability”

“So what you’re saying is that even though the guys working on our project are experts in their craft and even obtained the status of *journeyman*, the fundamentals should never be taken for granted.”

“Exactly.” Ethyl continued. “I understand and even expect that craft personnel are accomplished within their field. But that does not mean that they shouldn’t go back to the fundamentals. After all, it always seems like it’s the simple tasks that get overlooked. We also have a habit of not taking the time to give the proper level of attention to detail. We seem to forget that even experienced workers get hurt. Taking short cuts like not inspecting your equipment, not examining electrical connections, or simply ignoring the fact that a piece of equipment is damaged and that instead of tagging the equipment as ‘out-of-service’, it is used anyway, because it is too much trouble to get another tool.” Ethyl hesitated then added “how about people that find it too inconvenient to stop work because they forgot to wear safety glasses? If not properly used, even the simplest of hand tools can place anyone at risk. Experienced workers are by no means exempt from accidents and injuries.”

Bill nodded in agreement. He didn’t need to teach people how to do their jobs; just to remind of them of the importance of job task fundamentals. In that respect, we can all take a lesson from the great artists of the world.

Make the most of yourself, for that is all there is of you

Ralph Waldo Emerson