

WEST BAY SONSHIP YACHTS LTD.

Delta, BC

www.west-bay.com

Yacht manufacturer sails into safer era

When a small, family business expands quickly into a large company, sometimes it's hard to grow an effective safety program to keep up. So when West Bay Sonship Yachts Ltd. saw that with growth came a need for greater health and safety measures, it brought in a full-time coordinator and set him loose. It also became part of the WCB's Focus Firm Strategy.

"West Bay was a family operation that had grown really quickly and had outgrown its procedures," says Douglas Gunning, a foreman in the electrical department of the Delta-based custom yacht builder.

When Michael Vuorensivu arrived last year as the new safety training coordinator, there was an occupational health and safety program but nothing was formalized.

"There's been a real culture change in the last year," says Vuorensivu. "At one point early on, employees were voting on the bathroom wall whether I'd last or not." But he's managed to get buy-in from the workforce by perseverance and by making worthwhile improvements in the working conditions. The results show a big turnaround.

In 1997, West Bay's injury rate was 42.0, more than double the industry average. In 2000, their injury rate had dropped to 22.5 with 74 injuries, still slightly above the industry average but significantly reduced. In the first seven months of this year, West Bay has had only 26 injuries. At the same time West Bay has been constantly expanding its workforce to meet the market demand for its Yachts. Since 1997 it has grown from 170 employees to more than 430 this year.

"Getting someone in whose job was dedicated to health and safety has made a huge difference," says Steve Tye, WCB occupational hygiene officer in the Richmond/Delta region. "The largest change I've seen at West Bay is the creation of a safety culture. Now you see people within the firm who are vigilant about safety."

Being able to work cooperatively with WCB Prevention officers has helped Vuorensivu. "It's a huge difference between getting orders to follow the Regulation and what Steve Tye has done. He helps me out in coming up with solutions."

Since becoming a focus firm, West Bay has developed a musculoskeletal injuries (MSI) prevention program, created a new employee orientation package and a disability management program. Accident investigations are now completed on every injury requiring medical attention, and job procedures are being written up. As well, the company is reengineering equipment and adjusting parts of the worksite to improve safety.

"For example, we had four or five people a week falling down holes," says Vuorensivu. "Now temporary hatch covers are secured. We've worked on air quality issues. Everyone working around water now has to wear a lifejacket. We've put railings where there should be railings, and retrained the employees who were constructing stairs and temporary ladders as to how they should be constructed so there'd be fewer individuals falling off these things. We made sure all grinders and saws had guards on them."

Improving safety will also help the company retain quality employees. "The caliber of employee has risen over the past few years," says Gunning. "Because of the changes being made around here, people are staying longer. A safer and more enjoyable workplace come hand in hand."

"By reducing the likelihood that employees are going to get hurt, we have a better chance of producing a world-class yacht under a certain price tag," says Vuorensivu. "The owners have been throwing a lot of money at this, causing us to become a better company over it."

Looks like smooth sailing from here on in.

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