



Keeping the tigers at bay with good common sense

A secondary school sits on the hill above the Revelstoke sawmill run by Downie Timber Ltd. and Safety Coordinator Dave Kangas sees the students like kids at a zoo, wondering what it's like in the tiger cage.

"Working here, they're inside the cage," he says. "But following the rules, paying attention and respecting the surroundings means they can avoid being bitten."

That's the short form of how Kangas orients and trains young workers. The long form is literally: "If they've never had industrial experience or if this is one of their first jobs, I take twice as long," he says. "I give them the information and a lot of time to talk about it. They need more than a book or a video in this environment."

When young workers first set foot in the mill, Kangas makes the risks perfectly clear. "I show them the most intimidating things, how machinery can start up without warning."

Opening the discussion on lock-outs, he asks newcomers whether their arm or a broom handle is stronger. Kangas then puts a broom handle into a moving, rubber-lined conveyor that looks like "something mom would put groceries on." It splinters the wooden handle, making perfectly clear what would happen to their arm.

But tactics like those are not the prime motivators at Downie Timber. Young workers "need to have fear, but a respectful fear based on their understanding of the risks and safe, task-oriented work procedures. That's good common sense," says Kangas, who has trained 450 young workers in 10 years at the mill.

His key message is that young workers' own decisions most often determine what happens around hazards. Kangas always tells them, "You can come to me with any problems and always ask questions. If you're unsure about how to do something, stop and say so." Always emphasized in detail is their right to know, to participate and, most importantly to refuse unsafe work.

Following the orientation, experienced hands are paired and designated as buddies for the young workers.

They start with minimal exposure to equipment hazards and slowly work closer to them as knowledge and comfort levels rise. Meanwhile, careful training requires young workers to demonstrate they've learned safe work practices like proper lockout procedures.

Having a designated buddy ends "when it's clear you know what you're doing," says Kangas, noting that no one ever works alone in the mill. Even old hands must be in sight of others and easily checked on regularly by co-workers and supervisors.

Despite all their best efforts, however, injuries can occur. Two years ago, a young Downie Timber worker's arm was torn off when he reached into a moving conveyor to remove a piece of wood that "wasn't causing any difficulty and could have been left there," says Kangas. The arm was reattached, and therapy is making it more and more usable. The worker was trained and carried personal locks, but failed to use them. "He took a chance and the tiger bit him," says Kangas.

"People should go home to their families every day without pain and injury," says Kangas. "It takes a lot more time with young people, explaining hazards and exactly what can happen. We need to be more proactive than reactive. "Prevention is everything."