

How to give young workers a flying start on safety



From a facility at Abbotsford International Airport, the 600 employees of Cascade Aerospace have a worldwide reach —the company maintains and repairs commercial jets operated internationally, as well as transport aircraft for the Canadian forces.

That specialized, technical work meets strict Canadian, U.S. and European regulatory standards, keeping millions of travelers flying safely. But it also depends on an occupational health and safety program that protects Cascades' own employees, according to Earl Sepulveda, director of quality and training.

A major focus is the 13 per cent of the company's work force not yet 24 years old, Sepulveda says. "We treat young workers no differently than other employees, but an important element of their training and supervision is addressing issues unique to this group."

He cites factors like an unrealistic sense of youthful invulnerability, an enthusiasm that can often lead to risky behaviours, and an unwillingness to ask questions that may be driven by peer pressure or by an individual reluctance to admit lack of knowledge or understanding.

To stay ahead of these youth issues, Sepulveda describes how the company adapts strategies that also serve seasoned workers.

Safety Management System is a continual "root-cause analysis" of risk assessment data in order to meet Transport Canada health and safety requirements, in addition to those of WorkSafeBC. The system's "non-punitive reporting" allows workers to point out unsafe practices or conditions — anonymously if they want — and to get clarification of safe work procedures.

Human factor training involves showing employees how their thinking and behaviour affect safety. Slanted toward young workers, it can:

- ▶ Encourage questioning, or temper an uneducated impulse “to do the right thing when not understanding exactly what that entails can lead to injury for themselves or co-workers,” says Sepulveda.
- ▶ Use “relevant examples” to show how the physical capabilities of youth may feed a feeling of invincibility that’s simply not grounded in reality.

An emphasis on youth in training and supervision brings special attention to young workers in activities that range from mentoring to “daily safety walks” of all work areas by the plant health and safety coordinator, crew leads for teams of six to 10 workers, and company quality assurance personnel. Here are two examples of safety concerns in Cascade’s 250,000-square-foot facility:

- ▶ Following confined-space procedures inside areas like fuel tanks where jet fuel residues can lead to death by asphyxiation.
- ▶ Locking out aircraft hydraulic systems to keep moving components from striking or crushing workers.

“Young folks are like sponges when it comes to training,” says Sepulveda. “They like to get ‘hard’ trade and technical skills, as well as ‘soft’ skills like those around safety.”

In the training context, and at all levels of the company, he says, “Feedback back is key so we can understand and address issues of concern to all employees, including a relatively small group like young workers.

“Safety is a primary corporate concern, and Cascade takes a bottom-up approach where everyone, including young workers, is part of an effort that makes front-line safety happen.”