



A teaching tool for safety that no one really wants

When it comes to safety and young workers, an effective teaching tool at the Port Alberni Division of Catalyst Paper is the one everyone wishes didn't exist. It's a visit to the site where a 19 year-old died when caught by a moving conveyor in July 1997.

The death resonates in the Vancouver Island community, remembered nearly a decade later by many new mill employees, according to Peter Leitch, Catalyst's occupational health and safety manager.

He gives a "ground-level tour" to every newcomer, always stopping at the deadly conveyor where "every single employee has a chance to talk with me about safety."

Leitch emphasizes two points in those conversations. Aimed especially at young workers, the first is that "it's all right to question, to say, 'I'm not going to do this.' Everyone has a right to refuse work he or she believes is unsafe." The second is that no one has "a guaranteed safe job in this mill, whether you're an accountant or on the production line. Doing the work and working safely are inseparable."

Catalyst's young worker training systematically "fuses safety and job-specific work practices," says Leitch.

The result is a company culture embraced by management, the union and individual workers. It reflects six core beliefs: all injuries can be prevented; safety has the overriding priority; involvement in safety is essential; safety is a line responsibility; safety is built into every job; success in safety is contagious.

One aspect of the Catalyst culture is that everyone at the mill looks out for one another, according to Leitch. Post-training interviews with young workers indicate experienced hands were always being protective and "keeping the young in the middle of the pack. As well, young employees — taught to intervene if someone works unsafely — are increasingly willing to correct experienced co-workers.

Culture-building like that requires effective training, according to Leitch. He notes four features of the current Catalyst program that earned a 2004 Canadian Society of Safety Engineers' young worker training award for Norske Canada, the mill's former owner.



- ▶ More time is spent with young workers than others by job trainers, considered mentors, who are prepared to recognize and respond to young workers' needs.
- ▶ A “blended-learning” approach combines practical hands-on and computer-based training.
- ▶ No trainee advances without demonstrating “competency on all behavioural objectives required for the job.” A computer program called Traccess maintains individual learning profiles.
- ▶ Each course is continually evaluated with ongoing improvements driven by input from young workers, trainers and others.

The structure recognizes and encourages everyone to address common characteristics of young workers, according to Leitch.

One tactic is to relate safety to their personal interests and potential work lives, says Leitch. Leitch will say “close your eyes, and picture mountain biking or snowboarding.” He then asks them to imagine being seriously injured, and how that might affect career opportunities.

To overcome a reluctance to ask questions, trainers and others make a point of “engaging young workers in dialogue, and making sure everything’s clear.”

Finally, any sense of youthful invincibility is monitored after being addressed with the teaching tool everyone would rather not have, a visit to the scene of the tragic 1997 fatality.