

Questions are the answers to young worker safety



Two-way communication is needed to keep young workers safe on the job. This should encourage them to ask questions without hesitation, and allow supervisors and co-workers to raise questions of their own to assure a mutual understanding of safe work procedures.

“My job is to make young workers comfortable and trusting enough to ask any question any time about anything in the workplace,” says Bob Manning, health and safety coordinator for Johnston Packers Ltd.

The large slaughterhouse handles everything from hogs to lambs to beef, most locally-grown. About a third of its 90 employees are younger than 24 years, many of them local residents who started with the Chilliwack company as teenagers.

“They often lack the life skills to know when they should be asking questions, instead of jumping into a task they’re not really prepared for,” Manning says. “You find they’d rather just do it, in order to avoid admitting they don’t know something.”

Sometimes he stages “a little scenario” for young workers resistant to asking questions. “I tell them to hop onto a pallet resting on the blades of a forklift, ride it to the ceiling and replace a burned out light.” Manning never actually sends anyone on the risky 20-foot trip above the plant floor, but anyone willing to go “finds out immediately that he should use the right to question and refuse unsafe work.

“Make it clear that you care about them and their staying in one piece and it’s amazing how much harder people will try to work safely. Good education and training are the long and short of it,” he says.

Conditioning young workers to raise questions is a consistent theme of their Johnston Packers experience. It starts with an orientation that uses WorkSafeBC's *Lost Youth* video, a graphic presentation on real workers who suffered serious on-the-job injuries. Later, monitoring newcomers on the plant-floor, Manning continually prompts questions and sets up conversations so it's natural for young workers to raise questions. "If they have no questions, then something's wrong, and I follow up."

The questioning theme also carries over into training supervisors who deal with young workers. Manning uses *The Supervisor*, another dramatic WorkSafeBC video that examines the emotional, legal, and financial impacts on a supervisor when an accident causes a young worker's death.

Conducting plant tours for the parents of young workers also bring about useful questioning, according to Manning. "It makes parents comfortable to find out how much we stress safety, and allows them to speak intelligently with their kids about what happens here," he says.

The at-home family conversations lead to more on-the-job questions by young workers. "They say, 'Wow, my parents asked me questions all night.' The kids are more than okay with it — and so are we."