

On the cover

Roof Doctor safety officer Matthew Pitts and WorkSafeBC occupational safety officer Lindy Monahan talk site safety.



# Kelowna roofing firm takes safety to new heights

By Helena Bryan

You wouldn't call Howard Pfefferle a diplomat — he's the kind of guy who says exactly what's on his mind, whether it's hard to hear or not — but he is an ambassador of sorts.

As the owner and general manager of the Kelowna-based Roof Doctor, Pfefferle once approached health and safety as an afterthought. Today, he sees health and safety as central to good business. It's a change in approach he likes to share. After all, over the past few years, Pfefferle, along with his son Travis, has taken Roof Doctor from being a company with serious health and safety challenges to an industry leader — all while increasing productivity.

## No shortage of challenges

Most roofing companies are small and have tight budgets. Roof Doctor is no different, with 35 employees, including installers, sales and office staff, and subcontractors. Roofing workers tend to be seasonal, which also means new, and often young, employees every year.

Often, there are multiple jobsites to supervise: Roof Doctor completes from 500 to 600 jobs each year. And the work itself is high risk. Being just three metres (10 ft.) off the ground presents a high risk for injury. In 2017, five workers in general construction died from falls from elevation.

## Starts with commitment

It's hard to believe now, but a little more than five years ago, the company received two separate inspection notices on the same day for being in violation of fall protection regulations. Both notices said the infractions "were repeated and high-risk violations." These led to hefty fines, but Pfefferle says it wasn't the fines that spurred on his efforts.

Rather, it was WorkSafeBC Prevention Field Services supervisor Dale Alcock and occupational safety officer Lindy Monahan, who spent a lot of time with him opening his eyes to the benefits of a good safety program.

"When I first inspected Roof Doctor in 2009, they didn't have much of a health and safety program in place at all," says Monahan. "But over the next few years, we made multiple on-site visits to consult with and educate the management team and staff.

"After Howard and his crew attended the 2010 roofing conference, 'Putting the Roof on Injuries' — organized by WorkSafeBC and hosted by Okanagan College — Howard's desire was fully ignited. He began making significant changes to his health and safety program." In 2016, Pfefferle paid for his entire staff to attend the Fall Prevention Workshop at Okanagan College.

Pfefferle agrees with Monahan's take on his change of heart. "The Prevention officers made me realize I had their full support. One day, the light went on. I saw that if I could make my workers safer, I could also make Roof Doctor one of the best roofing companies in the area."

## Training, supervision, enforcement

Over the next few years, Pfefferle would implement a health and safety program that goes well beyond compliance and is now a shining example in the roofing sector.

First off, every worker — including sales personnel, subcontractors and their employees, and Pfefferle himself — is required to take a full-day fall protection course paid for by the company. And they must re-certify every three years.

"We give everyone a 30-day window," says Pfefferle. "If they don't take the course within that window, they don't work for me."



Dennis Johnson from the Roof Doctor using three points of contact.





Victor Barnes, Dennis Johnson, Jordan Johnson, and Mike Francis kicking and flattening rolls to prepare for torch seams.

Roof Doctor also pays for every employee to get Level 1 first aid training. And the company provides each installer with a fully-equipped first aid kit, which they must take with them to every jobsite.

Pfefferle has done the math. “We invest \$300 per employee for both the fall protection and first aid courses,” he says. “That investment is well worth it, even if an employee leaves, because the alternative is a potential injury or worse and that is much more costly — in both human and financial terms.”

To ensure his employees are applying what they’ve learned in training on the job, the company has an internal penalty system for unsafe behaviour. “The first violation goes on record,” Pfefferle says. “The second leads to a fine. If there’s a third, they’re gone.”

**“If the desire is there, any small business can do what Roof Doctor has done.”**

—Dale Alcock, WorkSafeBC Field Prevention Services supervisor

Pfefferle has also hired a full-time safety compliance officer whose job is to visit every Roof Doctor jobsite, unannounced, multiple times a day. Outfitted with a Roof Doctor vehicle with the company logo and the words “Site Safety” on the sides and rear, the compliance officer checks to make sure installers are properly tied off, first aid kits are fully stocked, and all the gear is in safe working order. And the company documents everything.

The company is also currently enrolled in the Certificate of Recognition Program, which is awarded to employers with health and safety programs that exceed regulatory requirements.

“Roof Doctor’s program goes way beyond cosmetic compliance,” says Alcock. “This is an employer who has taken ownership of health and safety. The company trains and supervises for safety and it can demonstrate that. It’s called due diligence and it’s a defence against injuries and penalties.”

### The competitive edge

There’s also a competitive advantage to managing health and safety, says Pfefferle. “There are no more shutdowns. And we’re not spending money on

defending ourselves against penalties. Instead, we're spending those savings on making the company better. We've had lots of clients who've said they chose us because of our elevated safety program."

Alcock says that roofers typically tell him that the Regulation is asking for the impossible. "Roof Doctor has proven that it's not," he says. "Their example proves that it's possible to protect workers — and do good business. If the desire is there, any small business can do what Roof Doctor has done." 🍷

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—Howard Pfefferle, owner and general manager,  
Roof Doctor, Kelowna, B.C.



Mike Francis recording temperatures using  
an infrared thermometer.



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