

The staff of Rayco Steel stand in front of a truck box outside their office in Sparwood, B.C.



# Developing a safety program that works

By Gail Johnson

Accessing external training can be a challenge for businesses in remote communities like Sparwood, B.C. To address this, the family-owned steel fabrication and mine service company, Rayco Steel has developed its own comprehensive training programs, installed certified first aid attendants, and expanded its overall safety program in collaboration with its staff.

When general manager Brett Ray's parents opened Rayco Steel in Sparwood, B.C., it was the early '80s. That decade saw high workplace injury rates across the province, reaching a peak of almost 15 injuries per 100 workers in 1984, according to research funded by the B.C. government. Since then, injury rates have fallen in B.C., but the manufacturing industry remains high risk, reporting 5,928 time-loss claims in 2017.

The heavy industrial service and manufacturing firm, which specializes in structural steel fabrication, maintenance, and equipment upgrades, started with only six workers — today, it employs over 50.

As the firm has evolved over the years, so has its commitment to workplace safety. Within the last decade in particular, Rayco Steel has made its workers' health and safety its number one priority.

"In the late '80s and early '90s, we had a choice to make — stay a fringe company or grow into a mainstream one. We chose the latter," Ray says. "In the last 10 or 12 years, safety has become a paramount feature of our work ... I really want the people I work with to succeed, and getting hurt doesn't factor into that," he adds.

## Facing challenges head-on

The services Rayco Steel provides are wide-ranging and complex. For one, it has a varied workforce, including welders and millrights, machinists, and mechanics. This creates challenges when it comes to making sure the workplace is safe for everyone who works there.

"With the multiple levels of experience needed, maintaining the proper amount of training that our workers require is an ongoing process," says Rayco Steel's health and safety manager, Scott Ferbrache.

“We have a lot of big equipment, a lot of big machinery, and a lot of high demands on our workers every day.

“Quite a while ago, we decided to make safety integral in our culture here. Now, we never miss an opportunity to push safety,” adds Ray. “We took the bull by the horns. Maturing as a company brought a fervent commitment to safety.”

So what does health and safety look like at Rayco Steel?

Since the company works in both the construction and mining sectors, it complies with both WorkSafeBC regulations and the Health, Safety and Reclamation Code for Mines in British Columbia.

Because it’s headquartered in a remote part of the province, near Fernie on the B.C.-Alberta border, accessing external training can be a challenge. So the company developed comprehensive and diverse training programs, drawing on a variety of third-party resources and in-house expertise. Rayco Steel has a number of courses, just some of which are on confined space entry, WHMIS, fall protection, forklifts, elevated work platforms, skid steer, and lockout. The team is also in the development stage of hoisting and rigging training program.

Over the last 10 years, the company has also created a formalized health and safety program and completed a Certificate of Recognition (COR), which requires having a third-party verify your program. Scott Febrache is also an external auditor for the COR program for other companies.

## The power of peers

Rayco Steel’s health and safety program takes a peer-to-peer approach. This means that workers have direct input into initiatives like formal hazard assessments. In the latest program revision, workers had major input into completing several hazard assessments surveys.

Because the program has incorporated input from employees, it doesn’t read like a cookie-cutter, off-the-shelf manual; rather, content is written in plain language and directly relates to the day-in, day-out duties that people actually perform.

Having workers help develop a health and safety program, rather than telling them what one consists of, goes a long way toward building a genuine and effective safety culture.

“We wanted to have our workers involved in the development of the program so they’d have buy-in,” Ferbrache explains. “When workers help create a program, they’ve got commitment to it.”

Ray adds: “They feel part of the program rather than subject to it. It changes the dynamic.” It also helps to deal with changes that may arise. “Our health and safety program is never finalized. Our program is always undergoing review. As work changes, legislation changes, so does our program evolve,” notes Ferbrache.

Here’s another way Rayco Steel has achieved buy-in to its safety program: workers themselves take the lead in company inspections and perform walk throughs that are distinct from safety inspections done by its joint health and safety committee. Every month, a different person completes an inspection at the facility, giving supervisors and managers a fresh perspective — another set of eyes — on any safety-related items. Workers also complete daily overhead bridge crane inspection, vehicle inspection, and equipment inspection reports.

By having people see their workplace through this lens, they gain a sense of responsibility and accountability. Their active participation makes them feel valued, the impact of which can’t be stressed enough.

## Utilizing the first aid attendant and services

Prior to the company doubling down on safety, workers with minor injuries often went to the hospital for treatment. WorkSafeBC occupational safety officer Jeff McKay offered guidance to help the firm establish an efficient, proactive first aid program. Now, all company lead hands have their OFA Level 1 certificates, while an OFA Level 3 first aid attendant works full time at the fabrication facility.

“Ideally, you want to prevent injuries from happening, but if they do happen, not everybody has to go to the hospital for minor cuts, scrapes, and bruises,” McKay says. “They were able to utilize a lot of what they already had in place. When you’re meeting the requirements for a safety program, why not utilize it to the best possible extent? They started recognizing that.”

The firm also realized that its first aid attendant, as well as members of the safety committee, could play a

valuable role in keeping an eye out for injury-related trends or unnecessary risk behaviours, then initiate action to overcome them.

“They address all aspects of health and safety, whether people are working off-site or on-site,” McKay says. “The company has developed its own responsibility for health and safety while also remaining extremely productive. Those two things don’t need to stand alone.”


## The importance of feeling valued

Amid its successes and busy schedule, Rayco Steel also makes a point of showing worker appreciation. For instance, it hosts quarterly barbecues in conjunction with monthly safety meetings. These opportunities to get together in a relaxed setting, while still discussing statistics, projects, and schedules, drive home the safety message that the firm is always striving for.

Certainly, a strong safety program benefits a business’s bottom line. Maintaining a healthy and safe workplace, for example, could yield a reduction in WorkSafeBC premiums. And over the last decade, Rayco Steel’s incident rates and hospital visits for minor injuries have greatly decreased, further diminishing costs, notes Ray. As the company has ramped up its safety efforts, it has benefited in less tangible ways too. Workers’ level of professionalism, for example, has soared.

“If I didn’t have these individuals, I wouldn’t have a business,” Ray says. “We’re here to support each other. These guys never know what they’ll be doing from one day to the next, and they’re prepared.

“It’s all about trust,” he adds. “If I can create an environment where people can trust they’re going to have what they need when they need it, and that we’re

committed to them, it comes back to you. If they trust you and see that you trust them, it really makes for a good time.” 

## Rayco Steel’s tips for a safer workplace

- 1 Develop a comprehensive training program that works for your worksite and facilities. If you are not able to get to training opportunities outside of your community, bring the training in to your staff.
- 2 Help all staff gain accountability and responsibility by involving them in your risk assessments and health and safety program. Your workers know what is working and not working with your program.
- 3 Your safety program should be in plain language and cover day-to-day activities.
- 4 Have a plan in place for dealing with injuries, from minor to severe. An in-house first aid attendant can help decrease recovery time and keep minor injuries from being a costly trip to the hospital.
- 5 Get advice. Whether you participate in a COR certification program or go another route, having a third party assess your safety program can help bring things to light that your team may miss.



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