

# Five Worth Fighting For

## *Presentation Hits Important Points Tying Executives, Field Workers To Safety*

BY LEEANN MATON

“Safety is near and dear to my heart,” said Dan Delcore, Vice President of Pepper Construction as he began his presentation at the latest Builders Association Contractor Safety Forum — and it’s not hard to see why.

Since starting out as a contractor after college and working his way up to a project manager and beyond, Delcore has spent 39 years in the construction industry. In his 20 years at Pepper, Delcore has called upon his firsthand knowledge of both the field and the office in his efforts to make safety a priority.

His presentation, consisting of five main points, shared some strategies that his company uses to instill a firm dedication to safety among its employees, both in the office and the field.

### 1) TOTAL COMMITMENT OF COMPANY’S PRESIDENT

Delcore said that he has worked for fewer than four different presidents at Pepper, each of whom had different approaches to safety and health. Some, he said, focused on a single aspect of it, such as safety equipment or safety training. However, the approach of the company’s current President & COO, Ken Egidi, has been one of “total commitment” to all aspects of making safety and health a priority from the office to the field. That kind of total commitment from the top down is essential to a successful safety plan, Delcore said.

For example, Delcore and Flentge both shared an occurrence several years ago when company leadership “laid down the law,” threatening dismissal to various superintendents who appeared not to make safety their priority. Thankfully, the wake-up call worked.

“Those superintendents today have a whole different attitude about safety,” said



*Safety Committee Chair Paul Flentge of Pepper Construction Company speaks to the crowd at the August Safety Forum, where Pepper Vice President Dan Delcore (background) gave a presentation on bridging the gap between field safety personnel and executives in the office.*

Delcore, who recommended that company leaders employ a “tough love” strategy — “Get it, or you’re out.”

Whatever strategy a particular company may choose, Delcore emphasized that cooperation and engagement from the company president, including participating in safety committee meetings, is essential for establishing safety as a foremost concern.

### 2) ONE YEAR OF FIELD WORK FOR NEW PROJECT MANAGERS

Most college graduates with degrees in Construction/Engineering, though intelligent, “have no idea what the field is about” when they enter construction careers after graduation, Delcore said.

Sharing his own career path took him from a contractor in the field to the office, Delcore said that Pepper implemented a rule requiring one year in the field for all new Project Managers to give them vital, on-the-ground knowledge. Knowing what to do first thing in the morning on a worksite with a line out the trailer door of subcontractors asking questions goes beyond

what textbooks teach. Delcore’s company has found that requiring field experience greatly benefits new Project Managers.

“When that project manager comes back into the office they have a new respect for what’s out there,” he said.

Flentge agreed, sharing an anecdote that he once walked through a site with an engineering graduate who couldn’t identify a metal stud.

“They’re just learning so much about seeing how it actually goes,” he said.

### 3) GET PROJECT MANAGERS INVOLVED IN YOUR SAFETY COMMITTEE

Delcore shared that at Pepper, the safety committee changes on a rotating basis, with half of the committee switching out every month and giving newer project managers the chance to contribute.

“I call it planting seeds,” Delcore said. “Those Project Managers go back into their workplace with that new understanding, and that grows.”

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# Matters Of Trust, Money At Safety Forum

BY LEEANN MATON

To Paul Flentge, the Builders Association's Safety and Health Committee Chair, there's nothing proprietary when it comes to safety.

Speaking before members from many different companies who came together for the most recent Contractor Safety Forum, it was fitting that Flentge shared that exact sentiment with the meeting's full crowd.

The forum, held August 13 at the Chicagoland Construction Safety Council in Hillside, focused on closing the information gap between office staff and the field when it comes to safety and health. Dan Delcore, Vice President of Pepper Construction Company, gave the main presentation.

There exists an "invisible wall, but a wall indeed between project management and the field," Flentge said before introducing Delcore. Companies still see a "separation that one side doesn't trust the other and vice-versa," he said, drawing enthusiastic agreement from some attendees.

Delcore's main presentation focused on closing the information gap between project managers or senior level staff and safety professionals (see related story on page 6).

After the presentation, a question and answer session revealed that many contractors were concerned about how to keep high safety standards in the face of a very tight bidding environment and building marketplace.

"The challenge we're all facing ... is the marketplace," Delcore said. "You take every low bid you've got and discount it 10% and maybe you get it." Often, additional savings need to be taken out of contractors, he added.

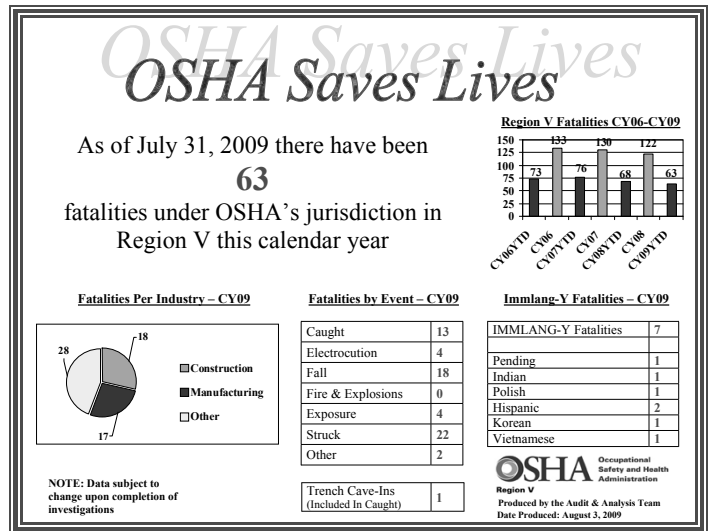
"The challenge we have today is to not take our eye off that safety ball because of dollars," he said. "We're at tighter times than I've ever seen."

Several attendees expressed that despite the tough times, owners are still supportive when it comes to shelling out extra money on jobsites to ensure safety, which Flentge was happy to hear.

Flentge shared his struggles in facing the attitude of some tradesman who aren't fully committed to safety and write off incidents to the fact that "this is tough work, people get hurt."

"But people don't have to get hurt," Flentge said, adding that trying to reinforce this idea industry wide is one of the main challenges of the industry rededicating itself to safety. He also said the mentality owners and contractors espouse when spending extra money to keep safe working conditions at a site should be one of "we'll make it up on the next one. We're not going to kill someone."

Other attendees worried that even when making safety a priority, tight bidding is forcing contractors to hire cheaper subcontractors with less-than-ideal safety records.



Delcore shared that at Pepper, subcontractors with MODs of one or more have to come in for a meeting to assess their level of commitment to safety.

A discussion with Jake Scott, from OSHA's Chicago North Area Office, rounded out the question and answer session. When one attendee noted that a majority of his roadwork projects had been inspected by OSHA recently, Scott said that OSHA has put renewed focus on inspecting roadwork sites, especially jobs using federal stimulus funds. However, he said, inspection activity hasn't increased overall for the construction industry.

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### 4) KEEP IT FRESH

Both Delcore and Flentge agreed that when people get complacent, ideas get stale and progress stagnates. Instead, revitalizing safety committees with new energy, new faces, and fresh approaches to get a company fired up about safety are necessary for progress.

Some attendees asked how a company monitors its actual commitment to safety beyond the office, to see if the work of the safety committee is making a tangible impact in the field.

Flentge said that question is admittedly one of the toughest challenges in creating safer workplaces. Turning ideas into real results is tough, he said, but suggested bringing ideas to a coordinating committee to implement them "where the rubber hits the road."

### 5) TIE SAFETY TO PROJECT MANAGERS' BONUSES

The last of the point in his presentation, Delcore explained Pepper's tactic of tying project managers' safety records to how they are compensated in bonuses. After adopting this strategy, Delcore said that Pepper has seen more project manager participation in monthly and weekly audits and toolbox talks.

"I want people to do it because it's the right thing to do not because they're going to get penalized," he said. "I just wish they would do it because they want to do it, because they believe in it."