Many of humanity’s greatest achievements began with a huge, audacious goal that seemed impossible. One of the most famous such goals was President Kennedy’s goal of landing a man safely on the moon in the span of 10 years. That goal was achieved with time to spare. Our own construction industry has also seen lofty goals set and reached.

The construction industry I entered in the 1960’s drastically changed over my 45-year career, especially in regards to safety. When I entered the industry, jobsite injuries and fatalities were considered a given due to the inherent hazards. By the 1980’s, jobsite fatalities were no longer considered acceptable and zero injury campaigns began. Fast forward to today: jobsite injuries are no longer considered acceptable, and the focus is now on zero near misses. There was a culture change; the cost and loss of valuable human resources became the focus of labor and management.

Initially there was an acknowledgement that the status quo was not acceptable and the well-being of employees and union members became a priority. Hazard analysis, the use of personal protective equipment and the use of other safety equipment became standard operating procedures. Today it is common for many companies to have zero injuries throughout a span of more than one year. Our industry set a lofty goal and attained it.

What would happen if the same process was used to attain zero suicides in the construction industry? Out of all industries, construction has the most suicides and the highest suicide rate. Our industry’s suicide rate is four times greater than the general population. We should all be outraged by our industry’s suicide epidemic.

Last month I talked about the importance of all employees having access to mental health benefits. It is also important for you to promote the creation of a culture where employees can talk openly about mental illness, substance use and suicidal thoughts. As business owners, are you providing a climate where it’s okay to talk about these issues without judgement or negative consequences? Do you have a return to work program for these issues similar to that of physical ailments?

As an industry let’s begin by stating that suicide deaths are unacceptable. September is Suicide Prevention Month and Sept. 10 is World Suicide Prevention Day. We changed the safety culture, now let’s change the mental health culture. Everyone needs to know and believe it is acceptable to seek help, and everyone needs to be supported when they seek help.

About the Author - Bob Swanson

Bob Swanson is the past president of Swanson & Youngdale and the first Chairman of FCA International. He tragically lost his son Michael to suicide on March 13, 2009 at the age of 33. Bob now focuses his efforts on creating awareness of the impact of mental health and suicide in the construction industry.

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