Mental Health Impacts Safety, Productivity and Quality

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by Bob Swanson

As a contractor, determining the skill level and experience of applicants during pre-hire interviews was essential. I would have the applicant tell me about their skills and experience. I would ask questions like, “How long have you been in the trade?” “Have you done commercial or industrial painting, or both?” “Are you comfortable using an aerial lift?” “Are you OSHA 10 or OSHA 30 certified?”

Why ask these questions? I needed to make sure the applicant had the required skills to perform the work in a safe, productive and high-quality manner before making an employment offer. Making a bad employment decision could possibly harm the individual, their fellow employees, company equipment and the company’s reputation.

After an employment offer was made and accepted, my focus shifted to placing the new employee where their skills met the required need. In my mind, it was a matter of putting the right person in the right place in order to get a project completed safely, productively, with high quality and on schedule. As job requirements changed, the use of labor remained a high focus.

One thing I didn’t always think about was the fact that there is much more to an employee than just technical skills. With continual pressure of getting a project done and staying on schedule, it was sometimes easy to forget the employee’s personal needs. If a job required overtime, I directed the crew to work overtime. If a job required the crew to work a different shift, I directed the crew to work a different shift. Sound familiar?

Regular readers of my blog may already see what’s wrong with that picture. By not addressing the personal needs of our employees working on a job, I put safety, productivity and quality at risk without even knowing it. Here’s an example. When I directed a crew to work a second shift, or 12 hour days, what impact did that have on an employee who met regularly with their therapist after their normal, eight hour shift? What impact did that have with employees needing a regular routine of eating and sleep to maintain their mental health? How did these directives impact the families of these employees?

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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Eventually, I learned it was beneficial for all parties to ask about the impact a change in job shift or job hours might have on each individual working the project. I also learned to give each employee permission to say they would not be able to meet the change in job schedule if it would have a negative impact on them or their family.

You might ask, “Who is running the business - you or the employees?” I was still running the business, I just discovered that employee morale, safety, work quality, productivity and company loyalty increased when I began focusing on the employees’ mental health.

We would never knowingly want an employee to work in an aerial lift if they were afraid of heights, because we wouldn’t want them to be injured or injure someone else. In that same line of thought, we shouldn’t put an employee in a situation that will endanger their mental health. We need to ensure the safety and mental health of each employee is valued.

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