

# REDUCING RISKS IN THE WOODS: SMART FOR BUSINESS

By Pam Jorgenson

Forestry is not an industry for the weak of heart. We have a legacy of operating around extreme hazards, of tackling difficult terrain and for overcoming huge obstacles. Risk has been an inherent part of business. But the times have changed. Companies are recognizing that accepting these high risks, and coping with the consequences, are not good business practices. And many companies are building strategies to move away from the old *git'er done* attitudes.

In their efforts to eliminate serious injuries in the woods Interfor is in the midst of a coastal initiative. This began with a detailed review of their work sites and safety results across BC, in which the number one issue causing serious injuries was identified: Workers accept a level of risk that is too high.

**Let your guys know you care. Let them know you don't want them taking any risks on your behalf.**

But isn't this the way of the woods?

Not everyone thinks it needs to be this way. Mike Hamilton, of Hamilton Logging, doesn't believe this should be the status quo any more. He has teamed up with Interfor in their work to talk to every supervisor—both staff and contractor—that works on their claim.

Mike's message is simple: "Let your guys know you care. Let them know you don't want them taking any risks on your behalf. We haven't done a very good job as an industry in letting the employee know this."

Safety professionals would agree that supervisors and company owners play a key role in reducing a worker's level of risk. They need to set up their systems to protect their workers, and they need to clearly communicate their expectations. Consider the incidents you've been exposed to – is the worker being neglectful or defiant, or might he be doing 'what he thought his boss wanted him to do?'

- Think of the faller going after the questionable tree to get the valuable log.
- Think of the log hauler driving on icy roads to get the last load in.
- Think of the field engineer trying to

get across the block faster by crossing the ravine on a suspended log.

In most of these cases, the workers are extremely committed to their employers and the overall operation. So committed, in fact, they may risk their lives to conduct a routine task. The supervisor has a big role to play in changing these accepted levels of risk.

To encourage supervisors to become more actively involved in lowering workers' exposure to hazards, Interfor is asking staff and contract supervisors to have one-on-one safety conversations with their workers on a regular basis to discuss hazards and risks. These are not the safety conversations that have been happening all along; they are in depth conversations where the worker is encouraged to identify the hazards

and risks and to explain how they will be managing the risk. Interfor's coastal operations are tracking these conversations in a pilot project and they hope the results will show that as conversations about risks and hazards increase, incidents will decrease. These types of results have been seen in other industries using similar programs.

Hamilton supports this approach. He believes that having open conversations with his staff is the key to success in keeping his guys safe and in running a smooth business. By setting time aside to get to know their concerns at the job, to redirect them when they're working in risky situations and even to flag personal issues, Mike and his supervisors are able to recognize when someone needs more support. And by providing that support, whether it means more training, a discussion of how to approach an onsite hazard, or sending someone home because his head isn't in the game, Mike's company is poised to reduce its risks and consequent losses.

Dean Fauchon, Woods Foreman with Helifor Canada has also been actively involved with Interfor's initiative

to reduce his workers' level of accepted risk. He believes he has already made progress with his staff, and is using some specific strategies to engage them in conversations where hazards can be raised and addressed before they cause incidents and loss to the individual and the company. He says he will continue to use these strategies, even after Interfor's project is complete.

Some of the principles that the companies are using to encourage discussion of risks at a site include:

- Set aside a time that is convenient for both the worker and the supervisor. Shut off any machines and have the discussion one-on-one.
- Ask open-ended questions that can't be answered with a yes or no. "Got any concerns?" won't get a supervisor very much information. Rather, try "What are your concerns?"
- Listen to the worker's response. Stay focused on his answers and don't get distracted by other things going on at the operation. Ask for clarification of any issues or concerns to show you've heard his points.
- If action is required, take it! A worker will stop raising his concerns if his supervisor doesn't act.
- Explain what you are going to do and when you will update the worker.

How often has a supervisor wondered after an incident, "Why did my employee decide to do that? Why did he do something so risky?" With open lines of communication and an opportunity to discuss the challenges, concerns and risks on a site, hopefully supervisors won't have to say these words—the incidents and consequent losses will simply be avoided.▲

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