

AUGUST 2009 FEATURE STORY:

Taking Danger Out of the Job

Fostering an Attitude of Safety in Underground Construction

By Gary Gagliardi

The definition of “danger” is: Exposure to harm, exposure or vulnerability to harm, injury, or loss; somebody or something that causes harm, injury or loss.

I recently saw a safety video in which the narrator repeatedly referred to trenching and excavation work as dangerous. Likewise, the same is normally said about tunneling work. Those comments made me reflect on how people view the work they do and the many different approaches to safety.

What does it mean to do work that is dangerous? What is it like to feel you have to work in an environment that is considered dangerous? Is it an attitude, possibly a point of pride or worker bravado? Or, is it an acceptance of things that people feel they have no control over?

If a person is in a work environment that is known to be dangerous, had we not as an industry failed that worker? Additionally, hasn't the worker's company not only failed the worker, but also violated the very basis of OSHA regulations that “the employer shall furnish to each of his employees employment and a place of employment which are free from recognized hazards that are causing or are likely to cause death or serious physical harm to his employees?”

If employees, managers and owners view or consider their work as dangerous, are we surrendering to this concept without even a fight, or could we be using this as an excuse that we just have to accept that danger will be factor of this type of work? Would we not also be accepting that injuries and accidents are a part of a dangerous work?

Danger, or Hazard?

What can be done if we are faced with what is deemed as “dangerous work”? Our first step is to throw away the concept that our work must be “dangerous”. We should never think to place any of our employees in a dangerous situation yet many employees believe that working in a dangerous environment is acceptable. Recognizing the extent that this attitude exists in an organization is important. It is essential to get employees to change that attitude.



As opposed to danger, the definition of “hazard” is: Potential danger; something that is potentially very dangerous. So while we can eliminate the word “dangerous” in describing our work, we must understand that there are many hazards in trenching, excavation and the underground construction industry.

It is only when we allow the hazards to continue that a dangerous situation can exist. By recognizing and identifying these hazards, we put ourselves in a position to act to either eliminate, control or protect the worker from the hazard. The best means for recognizing and identifying hazards is to seek the involvement of your employees. This also plays a critical role in achieving the change in attitude among employees that is required to create a safe working environment. Involving your employees is not an impossible task, but it does involve a dedicated effort. One way to get the process started is to have a daily hazard assessment conducted by foremen and discussed with their work crews at the start of each day.

Eliminating the attitude that your field of work is dangerous, and replacing that attitude with one of recognizing and identifying hazards will help to change attitudes and build a safety culture that will grow.

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