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SAFETY FIRST

The first lady of snow removal, Crystal Arlington, shares her keys to managing a safety-minded snow removal operation.

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Safety first

The first lady of snow removal, Crystal Arlington, shares her keys to managing a safety-minded snow removal operation.

BY CRYSTAL ARLINGTON

As business owners and managers, we easily get swept up in the day-to-day operations, particularly during the winter season with the demand for on time clearing and the unpredictability of Mother Nature. Often we lose sight of the most important aspect of our business: safety.

“Every day in America, 12 people go to work and never come home. Every year in America, 3.3 million people suffer a workplace injury from which they may never recover. These are preventable tragedies that disable our workers, devastate our families, and damage our economy,” blogged Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis in 2011. Nearly a million of these cases required days away from work, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Taking the time to make sure the staff is trained and educated on safety on a regular basis reduces the potential for accidents, operational inefficiencies and lawsuits.

What are the first steps companies can do to stay on the safety track?

All safety procedures and policies should be included in a written docu-



ment that includes both textural and visual explanations. This “safety manual” should be kept current and distributed and reviewed by all employees on a regular basis. Often, companies have the best intentions when they devise their safety guidelines, but then the document is left on a shelf. It goes without saying that all new employees should receive the safety manual and part of their supervisor’s responsibilities should include going through the manual with the new employee rather than waiting for the next company-wide safety meeting. It is a good idea to also assign a safety officer within the organization. One of the responsibilities of this individual is to make sure the regulations regarding safety according to local, state and federal laws are being met and practiced by the company.

The manual should start with an index that lists every piece of equipment employees operate in the business and its related page. This makes it easier for quick refreshers on equipment. Additionally, the index will include a section for safety procedures, the company hazard program as well as other topics a company may choose to include in their manual. After the index, include a brief description of your company’s safety philosophy and safety statement to help employees understand the importance of safety.

There is research available to help companies devise safety guidelines. The Outdoor Power Equipment Institute (OPEI), an international association representing the \$15 billion

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landscape, lawn and garden, forestry and utility equipment manufacturing industry, is the accredited developer of the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) and has outlined safety standards for many pieces of industry equipment.

There are an estimated 5,000 injuries each year related just to snow throwers/blowers in the United States according to Consumer Product Safety. Let’s look at what guidelines a company might include in their Safety Manual for Snow Throwers based on OPEI research:

- Know and understand all of the recommended safety procedures before turning on snow thrower.
- Keep the area of operation clear of all people.
- Clear the area of any debris before use to prevent thrower from being clogged, damaged and to prevent injury.
- Be careful never to throw snow toward people or cars; never allow anyone in front of your snow thrower.
- When repairing your machine or removing an object or unclogging built up snow from the auger blades or chute, always turn the snow thrower off and wait for all moving parts to come to a complete stop.
- Never put your hands inside the auger or chute - use a stick to unclog the snow thrower.

- Dress properly for the job. Wear adequate winter garments and footwear that is good for slippery surfaces. Wear safety glasses. Avoid any loose fitting clothing.

- Handle gas carefully: Avoid spillage by using non-spill containers with spouts. Fill up before you start, while the engine is cold. Store gas in a clean, dry, ventilated area and never near a pilot light, stove or heat source. Never smoke around gasoline.

- Do not clear snow across the face of slopes. Use extreme caution when changing directions on slopes. Do not attempt to clear steep slopes.

- Never operate the snow thrower without good visibility or light.

- Always be sure of your footing and keep a firm hold on the handles.

Beyond a written safety manual how can a company foster a culture of safety?

In addition to assigning a “safety officer” a company should establish a “safety team” comprised of three or four employees. These individuals spearhead the company’s safety program and training. Training is not just a once a year, 2-hour session with whoever in the company decides to show up that morning. Safety training for both new and existing employees should be mandatory. Companies in the green industry who achieve success in the area of safety often have three levels of training: weekly safety/training meetings to go over certain equipment and any issues related to the previous week’s work, monthly refresher training meetings lasting about 30 minutes and an annual safety training which is more in-depth. A solid training program includes a hands-on

In 2011, the Professional Landcare Network Association known as PLANET awarded Affiliated Grounds Maintenance Group with the Overall Safety Award Achievement Award Gold Level for the company’s consistent demonstration and commitment to safety from Jan. 1 through Dec. 31, 2010. The award honors businesses that demonstrate high-performing safety programs that result in safe work environments in the green industry.

“One worker’s compensation claim can quadruple or more the price of a company’s workers compensation insurance later i.e. going from an annual cost of \$25,000 to \$150,000.”

component in which employees who will be operating certain equipment are trained in safety on that machinery. Hands-on training is very effective; it is that old adage of “practice makes perfect.” The use of training videos is also helpful. There are numerous topics you can train employees on. For example:

- General equipment use
- Safety equipment
- Proper use of equipment
- How to dress according to conditions

- Personal safety
- Others’ safety – for example, pedestrian traffic

A number of useful Internet resources for safety education when developing a company’s training program include: www.osha.gov, www.ansi.org and www.opei.org. As part of the safety program, the safety team or safety officer should document everything the company does related to its safety, such as meetings, air temperature, ground temperature, current weather and the

safety procedures instituted and followed based on those conditions.

Everyone in the company – from the owner, manager, foreman, equipment operators and office staff – should cooperate to ensure a safe environment. They need to understand that safety goes beyond simply signing off that an employee has read the safety manual. It is about developing and honing skills and keeping everyone safe. One accident can have a profound and extremely negative impact on a person’s life. It is important to foster a safety culture in which everyone works with safety first in mind to protect themselves and others.

Most companies with solid safety records have strict enforcement poli-

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cies. At our companies, we have major and minor infractions. Employees who have a major infraction are terminated. With a minor infraction, such as not dressing properly, the employee receives a written warning. If another infraction occurs, the employee is terminated.

Some companies incorporate incentives into their safety program. This may be as simple as providing a company-wide outing for an outstanding year of safety to a more formal incentive program that rewards employees with products or gift certificates. Companies may include safety

5 KEY POINTS

- All safety procedures and policies should be included in a written document that includes both textual and visual explanations.
- Assign a safety officer within your organization.
- Rather than waiting for the next company-wide safety meeting, supervisors should review the safety manual with all new employees.
- Include an index in the company safety manual that lists every piece of equipment employees operate in the business and its related page.
- Include a brief description of your company's safety philosophy and safety statement to help employees understand the importance of safety.

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It's important to build a culture where employees think of safety first, says Arlington.

"All safety procedures and policies should be included in a written document that includes both textual and visual explanations."

procedures and policy as a component of their profit sharing program. Consider the negative impact lack of safety has on vehicle insurance costs, liability insurance costs, medical costs, worker's compensation costs, drug-free work program costs and overall company profitability. Granted, the costs of training are not inexpensive, but they far outweigh the disastrous costs associated with not training at all. One worker's compensation claim can quadruple or more the price of a

company's workers compensation insurance later, for instance, going from an annual cost of \$25,000 to \$150,000. Business owners must be good role models and practice what we preach and enforce it. Being a good snow contractor means taking on the responsibility of educating staff, the end users and ourselves.*

Crystal Arlington, CSP, CLP, is CEO and president, Affiliated Grounds Maintenance Group, Inc. (AGMG) in Erie, Pa.

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