

# PROTECTING THE PROTECTORS

## Safety for Facilities Management Workers

By Kenyon Brenish and Robert Pater

**Like most other OSH professionals, we are both protectors: strongly motivated to help others live injury free, encouraging them to be as active as they can be, healthy at work and home, and completing tasks well and safely.**

**Given this, we suggest** an upgrade in overall safety leadership mindset: moving above and beyond even the subtle wisps of envisioning our role as saving people from themselves, from their own myriad lack of attention, unmindful carelessness or less-than-ideal judgment. Away from our assessing that they “just don’t care enough” about their own safety and well-being to take all the precautions we would have them do. All while we’re simultaneously helping executives and other leaders elevate *their* mindsets, toward embracing a high-tensile melding of the strands of productivity and engagement along with safety.

While unfurling our protectors’ capes covers all kinds of industries, it especially pertains to the realm of those responsible for taking care of facilities. Because in this arena (as well as in some others), all facilities workers are protectors too. Safety leaders become protectors of the protectors. And this applies to a wide swath of industries that have at least some portion of people who are dedicated to facilities (e.g., maintaining, repairing, cleaning, servicing, moving equipment).

Consider, Collins Dictionary (n.d.) says “to give or be protection against something unpleasant means to prevent people or things from being harmed or damaged by it.” So, in the truest sense, facilities management employees all have safety responsibilities, not simply cleaning, janitorial or maintaining, but proactively “safeguarding”—upkeeping buildings, surfaces and equipment to ensure the well-being of employees, nonemployees, clients and customers who might visit, work, shop or transit through these sites—although the protectors may not know or even likely personally encounter any of these others.

Yet, while these facilities management protectors have some unique tasks, many of their safety exposures might ring similar, even to those of us who don’t have a large number of specifically termed “facilities” workers. Do any of these sound familiar? Do any of your workers, like facilities management personnel:

- work remotely on sites where your company can’t closely control the work environment?
- frequently do tasks with minimal direct moment-to-moment supervision?
- have a lot of manual work, where there are significant exposures to potential soft-tissue injuries, strains and sprains and slips, trips and falls?

If so, welcome to our world. Stir into this cauldron (with apologies to Shakespeare, “double, double, toils and rubbles, generating safety troubles”)

a general lack of prioritizing safety in the industry, often revealed as “get it done” mindsets and messages that prioritize speedy task completion, perhaps at the expense of self-monitoring limitations that might contribute to injury.

If you can relate to any of this, even in part, we hope you can glean some strategies to help reach managers, better protect workers, and make your job a little easier, more fulfilling and less frustrating.

Note that the facilities management sector may specifically encompass certain aspects to a greater degree than other work. According to Tymvios et al. (2022):

Facilities management includes all activities involved in managing a structure after the construction phase ends (Cotts et al., 2009). Activities during the operation, maintenance and repair phase of a facility can include maintaining and monitoring electrical, mechanical and plumbing systems; repairing and renovating cladding and curtain wall systems; making minor modifications to internal walls and layouts (Gallaher et al., 2004); and completing many other tasks. . . . These functions can include preventive and predictive maintenance, routine maintenance, reactive maintenance, major repairs, emergency repairs, alternations and upgrades. (p. 24)

- Facilities safety affects not only employees, but also subcontractors and the general public.
- Almost all facilities management work is manual and on-site, where it’s not even an option to work remotely. Facilities workers must be on-site and hands on.
- Conditions are not repetitive. Facilities workers often enter situations with many unknowns, to the effect that they can’t effectively anticipate and write out every job safety analysis. Where they must be personally aware of everything going on. Mindfulness, the focus on “what’s really happening or different now” is even more essential in this work.
- Employees often work alone so if they must move objects—which they frequently do—they may not likely be able to get help. For example, maintenance workers often work solo, even as they try to move heavy, bulky or awkward objects by themselves.
- Facilities workers are “invisible” to others. They may be performing tasks that are at risk, yet out of sight or even outside the specific knowledge of other people. For example, in mobile facilities services, workers may work on roofs, such as climbing on an

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unguarded HVAC system where perhaps only building security staff knows they're even there.

- They may also be on the flip side, in public view, cleaning up waste in an open setting where they must work while being watched, under scrutiny.

- They ultimately must flex with what they've got. They can't reasonably control the workspace or environment, so traditional ergonomic redesign doesn't apply.

- They must be self-directing, as they're often working alone and having to pace themselves. They don't necessarily have on-site line management in the facilities world.

Who we are: Kenyon is global EHS lead with Cushman & Wakefield (C&W) Global Occupier Services, with more than 27,000 employees in the Americas, more than 128,000 facilities managed and over 2.9 billion square feet managed, with more than 90 OSH professionals. *EHS Today* has recognized C&W's Global Occupier Services as one of America's safest companies. Kenyon previously worked for ISS, a leading facility management organization based in Denmark, as the Americas head of health, safety and environment, with more than 24,000 employees from Canada to Brazil.

A Master Lock (2021) report on C&W explains, "C&W integrates, aligns and executes EHS as an integral part of their operational framework." Kenyon says his workers are part of integrated facilities management, "where they're so embedded in a client's base that we almost become part of their structure, how they operate, dressed like client employees. We manage every part that's not part of their core business. This includes services as well as the property, reception, security, conference rooms, moves and changes, moving employee offices and workspaces to a different location—which frequently occurs—accommodating the workplace ecosystem changes post-pandemic."

Robert is founder and managing director of the MoveSMART system for preventing soft-tissue injuries, slips, trips and falls, and hand injuries, which has been applied to numerous companies globally for more than 3 decades, including many working in the facilities space.

Between us, we've been to many different sites and companies with a slew of clients, seen a few things and worked through several challenges and practical learnings that we'll share.

## 10 Facile Strategies for Building a Facilities OSH Culture

Because many facilities employees are working on their own, leaders must create a culture in which these workers are motivated and able to self-monitor their own personal and changing risks. They can't rely on or assume there's someone there continually watching out for them and their safety (of course, this applies to many thinly staffed manufacturing and other organizations as well).

To work safely and effectively, employees have to high-grade their personal awareness of everything that's going on. Kenyon indicates that in the

facilities management space the biggest challenge is that workers and their employers can't control the risk or the work environment that employees are exposed to daily. So, they must first better see changing risks and learn how to adjust to those they can't eliminate.

So, if organizational leaders aren't practically able to control workers' environments, what can they do to elevate OSH?

**1. Target the most prevalent injuries and exposures. Educate your staff that soft-tissue injuries are highly prevalent** (rather than just defaulting toward focusing on other issues, such as bloodborne pathogens, which, while important exposures to know and prevent, are more rare). Redirect the attention of leaders who might otherwise become overly fixated on relatively infrequent but important injury sources. Slips, trips and falls are also prevalent in the industry, as are soft-tissue wrist issues and shoulder or rotator cuff problems.

One contributor to upper limb problems is that facilities workers often must do a lot of reaching ("reach and clean"). And many facilities workers are older. As Perimeter Orthopaedics (n.d.) explains:

Because most rotator cuff tears are caused by normal wear and tear that comes with aging, people over 40 are at a higher risk. That risk increases for those involved in arm and shoulder dominant sports, like tennis, or in occupations requiring repetitive, overhead lifting, like painting. [emphasis added]

According to Johns Hopkins Medicine (n.d.): Changes in the rotator cuff that weaken it occur around the age of 30 and increase after that. . . . It is not known why rotator cuff tendons develop tears, but it's associated with aging. By the time someone is 60 years old, there is a good chance they have some partial tears or complete tears of the rotator cuff.

We've seen how facilities workers are often expected to do a significant amount of lifting and moving objects but don't always know the best, most efficient and safest methods. Janitorial services are an example of a specific exposure where workers must maneuver trash bins but can't see into them.

An additional contributor that may compound this can be a general lack of employees' work hardening to prepare for ongoing physical tasks. This often results in workers not necessarily being in top physical condition.

The good news is we've found there are practical mental and physical methods that can help workers significantly overcome many of these limitations.

**2. Team up with subject matter experts to see trends.** Look for better designs (e.g., trash bins that automatically open). Incorporate as much automation as possible. Seek out those with fresh eyes—fresh in the sense that their input may rarely be elicited. For example, learn the perceptions and opinions of seasoned facilities workers who are

highly familiar with real problems, as well as their take on practical strategies and interventions that might be embraced by them and coworkers.

**3. Redirect psychosocial contributors.** Recent research corroborates the strong degree to which psychosocial factors contribute to musculoskeletal disorders, which are a prime source of lost-time injuries in facilities (and which likely also result in lost productivity from workers being hampered by pain and movement restriction, but who haven't yet filed workers' compensation claims).

Soft-tissue injury psychosocial contributors include the amount of personal control workers have over their own work, quality of connected supervision, level of support of coworkers, feedback provided, opportunities for real engagement and participation, and a sense that the company is concerned about workers' well-being.

**4. Promote self-direction, as this is necessary in facilities work.** You can accomplish this by emphasizing placing workers more in control of their own personal safety. Transfer practical skills for their better being able to direct their attention, self-monitoring, redirecting forces away from most-vulnerable body parts, deepening balance while moving and working, and more.

Develop a prestart risk assessment tool or checklist to use when commencing a task for the first time, resuming work on a job or starting on a task that has recently been altered. This means that no operation will begin or proceed unless it's as safe as possible. All team members, including subcontractors, have the authority to stop an operation or activity if there is a concern.

**5. Raise employees' self-perception of their work.** Remind facilities workers that they are protectors, and that their real mission is honing and applying their vision to see hidden potential risks, take action to nip these risks in the bud to prevent harm to fellow workers, public visitors, buildings, equipment and more.

Mindset matters. We've found that when people embrace the importance of their role, they tend to perform on a higher and safer plane. Record for future action any issues that cannot be immediately resolved (and follow up and report back on these issues promptly to keep cultural OSH momentum moving in the right direction and to maintain leadership credibility).

**6. Disseminate training that is accessible, practical, understandable, and quick and easy to learn.** If your workforce tends toward being less educated—and many facilities workers' jobs may be their first (and can be their only) one—offer methods that make sense, weighted more toward practical skills and less toward theory. Note that “less educated” doesn't mean “stupid.” Many workers who might have relatively lower levels of formal education are often highly tool smart and street smart, and have practical wisdom and a high degree of “show me-ism” before blindly accepting theoretical but not realistic-to-them methods. Be



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sure to emphasize learnable skills over theory. For example, go beyond just exhorting people to “lift safely” toward practical techniques they can try out to decide if they work. Because, after all, workers who may do tasks alone or away from close supervision will make their own decisions as to what they actually employ. They must be self-convinced that these methods will make things easier and safer for them, not ordered or rah-rah motivated. This makes a strong case for focusing on internalizing safety, offering and persuading rather than dictating approved methods (of course, definitely vet the methods transferred for safety and effectiveness). For more, see “Internalizing Soft-Tissue Safety” (Pater, 2022d).

**7. Make all communications and training compelling,** so workers can see positive improvements in their own lives, rather than just “do it for the company,” “to save money” or “to get the work done.” Go beyond just words or pro forma messaging. One proven way to do this is to offer skills that readily improve workers' lives and abilities off work—in their favorite hobbies and with their families—so they readily embrace these skills.

**8. Reach facilities managers by primarily appealing to their operations mindset,** only secondarily to an accounting's calculus. In many companies now, smooth operations rule, with a focus on reasonable ways to ensure that workers are willing and capable of performing tasks to a high level. We've seen that, in the mind's eye of many executives, primarily keeping people at work and engaged has, for many organizations, become as important—or even in some cases superseded—the objective of reducing workers' compensation costs.

**9. Engage supplier and contractor management.** Controlling risks of facilities suppliers and contractors is critical because some companies subcontract out some of their facilities management

functions. Therefore, prior to initial selection, the review and approval of the OSH performance of suppliers are essential. Require suppliers to concentrically align their safe work practices and procedures with the facility's OSH requirements. This includes these supplier management requirements:

- prequalification
- periodic evaluation of on-site OSH performance, and
- closeout review following completion of the services.

The prequalification process should require that suppliers meet or exceed specified performance criteria. Each supplier is responsible for ensuring adherence to regulatory requirements, as well as executing any specific OSH requirements established by the customer site. The qualification process for suppliers or contractors should include requiring that clear procedures and training programs be incorporated into their management system, as well as their demonstrating high-level OSH metrics performance.

Also, provide formal induction for supplier and contractor teams so they understand the code of conduct, standards, objectives, methods and culture consistent with their service delivery.

**10. Have leadership integrate OSH into their mindset and procedures by embedding safety into their operational reviews.** Kenyon notes, "There's a lack of prioritizing safety in the facilities management industry overall. We're not as mature as some others when it comes to OSH culture."

Create a communications strategy that expresses objectives to work clearly and efficiently including commitment to:

- zero incidents or harm
- zero damage to the client's real estate and facilities portfolios
- a culture that values and actively supports OSH leadership

When their perspective is broadened, leaders can better understand the actual impacts of OSH on the bottom line: affecting worker attraction and retention, encouraging productivity, reducing time-draining problems, even marketing and becoming more competitive in contract bids. This often helps them see how their active support for OSH benefits them and the company overall.

The easier you make it for senior leaders to make changes (including smoothing the path for needed logistics, setting up and charting leading and lagging indicators, garnering advance support for safety improvements up and down the organization and more), the more likely leaders will buy into and drive these changes from their level.

Build systems to maintain OSH excellence across your facilities operations. Integrate OSH into all aspects of culture, with information technology tools and proven processes that align with an OSH management system and drive toward a zero-incident, uninterrupted service model.

Focus on continued improvement and enhancing the level of facilities management and services. Applying best-fit OSH solutions requires a thorough

understanding of the facilities strategy, operating environment, infrastructure, culture and regulatory environment. Protection of your facilities assets and personnel and the mitigation of risk will create a safer, more productive and comfortable work environment for all that utilize the space.

## Maintaining a Supporting Foundation

The International Facilities Management Association (n.d.) says that facility workers "manage risks including those to facilities, employees, suppliers and business reputation." While facilities management workers are guardians of sites, they are ultimately risk reducers and protectors of others. By upgrading their—and company leadership—mindsets and tangible skill sets, we can better help protect these protectors, stimulating cascading waves that positively affect the safety, health and well-being of many others. **PSJ**

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