

TAKING A MOMENT FOR SAFETY in Management Consulting

By Emily Hodges

Getting the message out about safe practices at work and home is important even in industries not typically considered hazardous. Promoting a positive safety culture requires a strong message starting from the top leadership of an organization.

Taking time out for safety by conducting 5-minute presentations on safety and health topics of broad interest demonstrates care for and interest in employee safety and well-being, and provides opportunities for safety professionals to showcase their technical expertise.

For more than 3 years, my employer, a global technology and consulting firm, has been taking time out for safety by hosting what we call “safety moments” at team all-hands meetings each month. In early 2017, the company’s leadership identified this as an opportunity to promote employee safety and well-being, seeing value in taking a breath and focusing on how to stay safe and healthy at work and home. Leadership asked the firm’s safety practitioners to develop and deliver these talks each month, and we jumped at the opportunity. As a safety professional, I have been heartened by the firm’s support for safety moments, the feedback that presenters have received from fellow employees, and the benefits that have been gained by our safety professionals in developing and delivering these talks.

My employer has approximately 27,000 employees of whom 600 attend my team’s monthly all-hands meetings. The attendees support the firm’s various business units and clients. The goal of these meetings is to keep employees up to date on the latest corporate initiatives and programs, key client projects, and guidance from senior leadership, and the agendas are necessarily packed.

As a technology and consulting firm, the vast majority of the firm’s employees do not work in safety or spend their

days doing what would typically be considered hazardous activities. Our data scientists, engineers, technologists, cyber and defense experts, and management consultants do not drive powered industrial trucks, will likely never have to wear personal fall protection equipment to climb a communications tower (although a few of us have), and may not know their way around a safety data sheet.

According to Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS, 2017), the incidence rate, or number of injuries per 100 full-time equivalent workers, in the management, scientific and technical consulting industry in the U.S. was 0.5 in 2018, substantially lower than in higher-risk industries such as construction (2.9), manufacturing (3.1), and healthcare and social assistance (3.7). But, as those of us in the safety profession have learned, even one fatality, injury or illness is too many, and both workplace and at-home injuries to employees can hurt morale, impede productivity and impact mission execution. And the economic costs are considerable: National Safety Council (NSC, 2017) estimates that the average cost of disabling at-home injuries is \$9,100, while disabling workplace injuries average \$35,000 excluding employer costs. All the more reason to disseminate the safety message as widely as possible. Talking about safety and health is important, even in industries such as consulting and workplaces such as modern office buildings and home offices, where employees may not pay much mind to the hazards around them, and it is best approached as an integral part of the overall operation of a business, rather than as an occasional priority (Busick, 2019).

Each month, the company’s safety moments focus on a different aspect of at-home or workplace safety and health, and the presenters strive to make the content relatable and easy for their busy, diverse and technically savvy coworkers to absorb, then apply the information in their own lives. Think “here are four things you want to check before getting on a ladder,” rather than “be careful using ladders.” We discuss technical sub-

jects such as perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances in the water supply, but make them relevant by describing the consumer products that these substances are found in and how to reduce exposure. We also champion public health and safety initiatives and services such as annual flu shots and first aid/cardiopulmonary resuscitation, and automated external defibrillator training.

Other safety moments have provided timely seasonal guidance on at-home safety challenges such as snow shoveling, holiday decorating and cooking, and swimming pool safety. During a summer safety moment on sun exposure, the presenter delivered a brief explainer on the ultraviolet index to give people context about what they may see and hear about dangerous conditions on TV weather reports or their smartphone weather apps. Some safety moment topics are unique to the firm’s industry, for example, the stress that accompanies contract proposal submission season. But most topics can apply to anyone, such as how to read a safety data sheet for a chemical to be used in a home improvement project.

Feedback on these safety moments from employees and team leadership has been overwhelmingly positive. We always take a few minutes for discussion at the end, and participants will often share personal stories about a safety incident at home or work that shook them up or changed how they do things. After a safety moment on lawn mower safety, a senior vice president told the group a harrowing story from her childhood about a neighbor who was injured while using a lawn mower. Every one of us left that meeting with an indelible image in our minds of what can go wrong if you mow the lawn barefoot. And, more than 2 years later, people are still talking about that safety moment.

Not all safety moments are gloomy cautionary tales, however. Colleagues often approach the presenters or reach out after meetings to relate personal stories and share why a safety moment was meaningful to them. Sometimes

Vantage Point

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the discussions take an amusing turn, such as when a vice president remarked following a safety moment on hazardous household chemicals that he would no longer clean his house now that he had been apprised of the dangers.

Whether the discussions lead to laughs or a sober retelling of a personal experience with a hazard at home or work, the feedback shows that our message is resonating.

Safety moments have also given the firm's niche OSH community of practice an opportunity to showcase its technical know-how to the rest of the firm. Our 100 OSH, industrial hygiene, hazardous materials management and other aligned professionals help our clients develop, manage and sustain their OSH programs and safety management systems, and provide practical solutions to mitigate risk in client operations that involve use and management of hazardous chemicals, work at heights and exposure to hazardous energy, among other challenges. We brief, advise and train at every level of an

organization on how to improve safety outcomes and protect employees, from medical center directors to personnel performing corrosion control on aircraft and maintaining National Airspace System systems and equipment. We can speak fluently about safety and health subjects to broad audiences with varying levels of safety expertise because we do it every day for our clients, and safety moments give us an opportunity to bring those skills to bear to help the firm and fellow employees.

In the past year alone, we had a fire protection engineer deliver a safety moment on space heater safety, an asbestos inspector lead a discussion on asbestos and lead-based paint for home buyers, and a retired Air Force bioenvironmental engineer give a talk on heat stress. As COVID-19 came to dominate the nation's, our clients' and the firm's attention, heightening everyone's awareness of OSH challenges and our in-house expertise, the safety moments pivoted to timely discussions about working safely at home and volunteer opportunities to support the public health response to the pandemic in our own communities.

Our OSH and other aligned professionals are eager to share what they know, and presenting safety moments has helped us to spread the word on our capabilities and make cross-functional connections across the firm's business units to strengthen the organization. As one example, after presenting a safety moment on carbon monoxide, the presenter met a fellow employee, a former fire chief, who shared his experiences responding to related emergencies. Making connections and better understanding colleagues' expertise and experience are essential to our business, and safety moments can play a part.

Delivering safety moments also affords opportunities for OSH professionals to sharpen their knowledge on a particular safety or health topic, or learn more about areas of professional or public interest. One OSH community member delivered a safety moment on radiation in household objects after a TV series on Chernobyl piqued his interest about this subject. After the presentation, the audience's many questions relating to specific objects in their own homes showed that this topic caught the ear of many colleagues. When my own turn came to deliver a safety

moment, I used the opportunity to sharpen my knowledge on electrical contact release, having just taken on a new role teaching electrical safety to a client. We also encourage junior OSH professionals to present safety moments in support of their professional goals and to raise their profiles across the firm. We have found that developing and delivering safety moments not only benefits us as OSH professionals, but enables us to pass on what we learn to clients for use in employee safety stand-downs, training and other tools to promote the safety message in their own operations.

Safety moments have provided an opportunity to harness the expertise of our firm's safety and health professionals to help fellow employees live safer, healthier lives and be ready to support our clients in tackling their toughest problems. One of the firm's executives has said that safety moments are "universally valuable" to the firm and its employees, and wants them to be expanded to new audiences. We are proud of this effort and would encourage safety practitioners, regardless of employer size, industry or level of employee safety knowledge, to share what they know and how they can help fellow employees be safe and healthy at work and home.

My organization's guiding purpose is to "empower people to change the world," and arming the firm's most valuable assets, its employees, with practical, easy-to-apply safety knowledge is one small way we make change for the better, one person and one at-home or workplace safety challenge at a time. To that end, our next safety moment will discuss how to properly apply a tourniquet to a bleeding injury—knowledge that hopefully few of us will ever need to use, but if we do, we will be ready. **PSJ**

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SAFETY MOMENT TOPICS

From 2017 to 2020, safety moment meetings have shared information on a range of topics:

- asbestos and lead-based paint for home buyers
- barbecuing
- behavior-based safety
- "cyber slouch"
- distracted driving
- eye strain
- fatigue
- first aid/CPR/automated external defibrillator
- flu season
- hazardous household chemicals
- heat stress
- household electrical safety
- hurricane awareness
- indoor air quality
- insect awareness and precautions
- lawn mowers
- medical reserve corps
- perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances
- radiation in household objects
- snow shoveling
- space heaters
- stress management
- "stop the bleed"
- sun safety
- swimming pools
- Thanksgiving cooking
- tornado awareness
- winter fire safety
- working safely at home