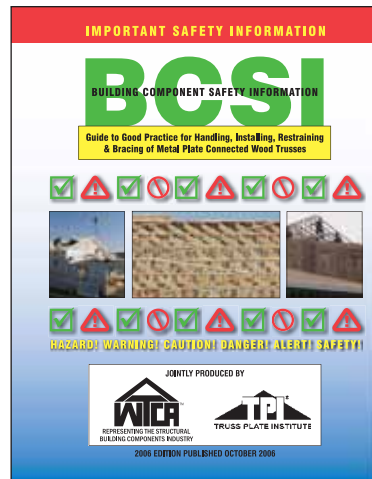




# Jobsite Safety Is No Accident

by Gerry Sackett

One builder tells how BCSI helped his framing crew become more aware of safety on the jobsite.



## at a glance

- With BCSI, WTCA provides a high caliber safety and technical resource.
- The BCSI series has raised the bar on safety for the producers and the end-users of all manufactured products.
- One "small" accident resulted in a serious spinal injury and claims over \$150,000.
- The unfortunate incident caused this builder to tighten its reigns on jobsite safety practices.

**S**afety is No Accident"...the implication of this play on words is that safety is not by chance, but the result of concerned specific thought....a plan.

Puns and humor aside, in the construction and manufacturing industries there are endless possibilities for accidents which are no laughing matter. People can and do get injured and even lose their lives, every year. OSHA and the AGC have implemented standards for safety that include training of personnel, requirements for specific safety equipment, programs for regular inspections, and documentation for the safety measures taken, and for "accidents" if they do occur.

With the publication of BCSI, WTCA and TPI have added to these standards a safety and technical resource of the highest caliber. At the same time, they have raised the bar of industry commitment to safety, not just in the component industry, but for the producers and the end-users of all manufactured products.

Given these resources, the question is how to implement safety principles in the construction workplace. Where scores of workers are on a single jobsite, a lapse of safety standards could result in an accident of disastrous proportion, affecting many individuals. Responsible employers accept the OSHA safety requirements applicable to their trade, as a given condition and cost of doing business. Larger operations often designate a safety officer or coordinator to oversee a safety program company-wide.

The scope of safety hazards facing smaller manufacturing and custom residential contractors is, of course, much different than for the large commercial companies, but represent no less important a consideration of doing good business. For the start-up and owner-operated business the wisdom and economy of developing a "culture of safety" may dawn slowly, but is value added to the workforce that makes the business grow.

Abrahamse & Co Builders began as a small residential builder and remodeling contractor. Over the last 31 years we have grown to a staff of over 60 with a core of long-time employees, including eight in management and twenty-five to thirty carpenters in the field. Our work ranges from fine custom residential to institutional (mainly churches), commercial-industrial and some specialty work in parks and on historical sites.

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## Jobsite Safety...

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As a "small contractor" we were fairly relaxed about safety issues and seemed to get by okay. Everyone more or less took care of themselves. Many small operations are run in this way and have no problem. But all it takes is one problem.

In 1989 an Abrahamse masonry laborer erecting scaffold fell from only one rung high, (about two feet off the ground), fracturing a vertebrae. It was a serious spinal injury and resulted in claims over \$150,000. Our Workman's Compensation carrier canceled our policies.

This accident, plus a run of previous minor claims had tipped the scale and run our "insurance mod" off the chart. We thought our premiums were high before—the options for continued coverage were sky high. However, those rates could be softened by implementation of a viable Safety Program with periodic monitoring by an agent of the insurance provider, including surprise site inspections. We could no longer afford to let safety issues "take care of themselves."

We decided to appoint a Safety Officer from among our management staff to direct a company-wide safety overhaul. Taking stock of where we were and what resources were available in-house and through industry organizations such as OSHA and the AGC, two fundamentals became clear:

The core of a good safety program is a written policy, a statement of the safety measures and procedures to be used and maintained company wide. By and large these are common sense rules of engagement for the trade in practice, bound in booklet form and kept on site by every supervisor.

The life of a good safety program is effective leadership by general management and key field supervisors to establish a culture of safety within the ranks of the workforce in general. Once this "culture of safety" takes root, new hires, young, and older workers will go with the flow, and follow the established order.

### Steps We Took to Develop a Viable Safety Program

1. We directed the Safety Officer to recruit two people from general field staff to serve as Safety Coordinators and to offer a bonus or pay increase for accepting this level of responsi-

"Abrahamse & Company is committed to providing a safe work place for its employees. Nothing is as scary, heartbreaking, or expensive as a serious accident happening to one of your own. Preventing accidents takes a lot of perseverance, patience, and the willingness to spend the time and money to set up a job in a way that meets proper safety standards. Over time though, if the workers in the field know that you would rather spend that time and money to be safe than take unnecessary risks, they will become responsible for the safety of their working environment. That is when you know your program is working."

—Dale Abrahamse, founder and president of Abrahamse & Co Builders

bility. This served to involve workers personally in their own safety and at the same time reduced the burden on management to achieve the shift in overall company awareness of safety that was needed at the time. It was to be their duty to implement our new policies in the workplace.

2. The Safety Officer was charged with compiling a Safety Manual and Employee Handbook to establish the base of our program. This required a focused effort to organize and to communicate company position on everything from safety and absenteeism to drugs and sexual

harassment. As a foundation statement of general company policy, this handbook clearly shows that a viable Safety Program is in force. It is given to all employees and is the basis for new hire training and for periodic company-wide safety meetings.

3. The Safety Team began to assess the condition of all tools and equipment. Anything substandard was repaired or removed from service. We recorded every tool in a central log, listed by tool number, noting the location, condition and repair records, date and cost of original purchase. Supervisors were charged to conduct a quarterly safety check of all electrical equipment, field power panels, lock-outs, etc.; forklifts, work platforms in use and emergency equipment or supplies are checked weekly. All inspections are recorded in the Daily Log.

4. We began to standardize and upgrade our Job Staging. This category can include some costly equipment such as forklifts, ladders, scaffolding, and lifting equipment as well as procedures followed for on-site storage and handling of fuel, fire protection and disposal of hazardous waste. Safety signage, workplace lighting and general housekeeping also were subject to new oversight and organization. We recognized the need for specific employee training and industry certification for equipment operators.

5. For our weekly "Tool Box Safety Meetings" we subscribe to a service that provides a variety of prepared topics. All those attending sign in on the lesson sheet, which, entered in the Log, becomes documentation of the Safety Program. BCSI is of particular value as an additional lesson resource with floor and roof construction addressed in expert detail and "tri-lingual" (in English, Spanish and in pictures). We provide a copy of BCSI to all Supervisors and insist recommended procedures be followed.

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The core of a good safety program is a written policy, a statement of the safety measures and procedures to be used and maintained company wide.

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Personal involvement is ultimately the key to success with any program.

### Jobsite Safety...

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It's a good idea to have crew members rotate in reading the lessons, which then can be opened up for discussion. If possible, we let the work underway suggest the topic, such as how to set trusses safely, rig a crane for lifting, manage a tag line, etc. The point is to involve the workers in their own safety through discussion and experience.

6. We began to look at procedures we generally follow and make comparisons with what are known as "Best Practice" procedures industry-wide. We subscribe to trade journals that examine the performance of tools, and share how-to info from experts in the field, and make it a point to distribute good information to the supervisors and general staff. At our quarterly Supervisors Meeting we solicit questions and information from the field about how to improve operations and the bottom line. A success on one job becomes a success on the next. A problem identified need not be repeated.

The importance of good information cannot be overstated. The shop drawings issued on a set of trusses, even with the engineer's stamp of approval, may contain mistakes. Once on site, a mistake in a truss package can be costly and hazardous. We insist that our job Supervisors make a detailed review of all "shops" before fabrication, and consider that process an exercise of "partnership" with our supplier.

7. We expanded our membership in trade organizations such as the AGC, WTCA, local home builders association, Construction Specification Institute, Safety Alliance, etc. We ask for supervisor or project manager volunteers to represent our company at the chapter meetings, which allows for individual involvement and underlines our commitment to the concepts of safety and community in the trades. There is no need to re-invent the wheel when so many are facing the same kind of challenges, and it's good to network with others in the industry we all have a stake in building.

8. In order to keep up with the latest safety trends and the requirements of the law, we designate one or more persons from the general staff to be trained and certified as OSHA COMPETENT annually. This training increases awareness and skill to bring operations up to industry standards and is an important investment in the safety of the workplace. The erection and management of work platforms, scaffolding, and ladders, required fall protection means and availability of personal safety gear are covered in detail. Electrical grounding, appropriate safety lock-outs, opera-

tion of forklifts and other equipment, and operator certifications are all within the scope of training offered.

OSHA certifications may keep your company out of hot water if you have a "surprise" inspection. OSHA field inspectors are required to wait up to one hour for your OSHA Competent person to arrive on-site to assist with the review. With a written safety policy and OSHA trained personnel you are already on second base instead of two strikes down when the OSHA inspector pulls into the lot.

9. When subcontract labor is involved in our work we include language in our written contracts that requires subcontractor personnel to adhere to our company safety standards and provide the standards in written form. This helps to fairly spread the responsibility for jobsite safety and to engage the subs as cooperative partners working together.

Personal involvement is ultimately the key to success with any program. Having a company policy, a safety manual, stocked first-aid kits, and charged fire extinguishers are not worth much without the interest and participation of those with their hands in the work. Let management take the lead with policy and resources; supervisors with regular subjective lessons, documentation and on-site implementation of good practice; and selected personnel with specific responsibilities relative to safety.

At Abrahamse & Co we have found that involving individuals on all levels of our workforce in the quality of our operations is the key to development of a culture of safety company-wide. Easy to use resources such as BCSI, investment in specific training such as Basic First Aid, and OSHA Competent Certification go a long way. For sure, it is an ongoing effort, but there is no doubt that the effort pays off and underpins the bottom line of our projects.

For several years our "insurance mod" has dropped and our workers comp premiums have reduced. We have an excellent safety record. We still have random inspections by a safety auditor employed by our insurance carrier, though now at our request, and we recognize the benefit of the oversight, taking their suggestions and appraisals seriously. We feel that having a real safety program makes Abrahamse & Co a better place to work. **SBC**

*Gerry Sackett, owner of GERRYRIGS, LLC, has worked in general construction since 1968, and served as a Project Manager for Abrahamse & Co Builders of Charlottesville, VA for over 20 years. Since his apprenticeship with a company known as Speed-Space in the 1970s, Gerry has had an interest in component and modular innovation. GERRYRIGS is a member of WTCA and its Capitol Area Chapter.*



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