

Cycle of Safety
(In a cyclical Industry)
By Wade Rohloff
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These are observations about safety, from having spent 24 years in the cyclical oil and natural gas industry.

Since this industry is never stable for long, the effort to provide a safe workplace has to be flexible and strategic goals adjusted to fit the situation. I will outline those goals within the situations described below;

Emerging from a bust

The oilfield recovering from a bust is usually a slow painful process whereby priorities are chosen based on lower revenue. The goal(s) in safety are to keep people from injury and protect the company's bottom line by not getting into expensive medical care, maintaining good safe statistics so that insurances do not increase and to maintain marketability of our workforce. Those goals may seem more difficult at this time but they are actually easier than a boom period when hiring new people on a regular basis disrupts workforce continuity. Managers are usually more able to focus on unresolved issues and provide guidance. Safety people should take advantage of this situation to make sure our core people are following proper procedures and ferret out bad habits. This is much easier than with an increased workforce.

Know this: A safe work situation where there are redundant work procedures requires establishing and maintaining a good work rhythm. The longer a crew stays together the better established that rhythm becomes.

Stable Working Environment

The oilfield rarely experiences this phenomenon. Should it occur that a satisfactory, but not overwhelming amount of business is occurring, safety people should continue with and refine their safety efforts to ensure good, safe procedures are followed. The amount of effort put into safety at this point could pay dividends when the inevitable "boom" occurs. Having a core of safe workers can help you defend safety efforts later on. Statistically we have fewer accidents/incidents when we are working at bust or stable levels. Workers are more thoughtful about their actions and more amenable toward instruction. The uncontrollable, rebellious and un-trainable employees have usually left long before this point.

The re-furbishment of equipment is usually done during this period, albeit at a slow pace. It seems it is never quite completed before the boom hits. That is life in a cyclical industry. Get used to it. Workers can still work safe given proper training and enforcement of good procedures. Safety people should be out among the workforce pointing out problem areas and seeking practical solutions.

Booming Business

Building up to a Boom presents several problems for safety people;

#1 - How do I train the new people in the OSHA required training?

#2 - How are our managers training them in proper workplace procedures?

#3 - Are the managers passing on bad habits to the next generation of workers?

If you don't have answers for those questions you are behind the curve. Being in a cyclical industry, we have to become experts at training new people, when the time comes. We should also have some inflexible policies built in that are supported by management. Working out proper procedures during boom time puts people at risk. You should have done this work during the cyclical down time. It would have been much easier. Regulators and a jury in a lawsuit will not understand that you "didn't have time" to establish proper workplace procedures.

Hiring practices now come into play. Do you have a screening process in place? Often times the safety people are also the human resources department in smaller companies and some larger ones. Either way, these two departments must work hand-in-hand to ensure a safe workplace.

Recruiting, hiring and training new people can take all of the energies the safety department can muster. This is why I developed a training method in the **ST** series of workbooks (**RST**, **OST** and **WST**) to make it easier to accomplish the OSHA required training before or during the employees first day on the job.

During this period of elevated business the safety people often don't find enough time to be out on every work location. *The safety department usually grows more slowly than the workforce and can quickly get behind during the most risky part of our cycles.* This is why accidents and incidents can get out of control during a boom. Do yourself a favor and solve every issue you can long before the boom hits.

On work locations the managers must be training new employees in proper ways to accomplish tasks. For this purpose I built a workbook, the **Roughnecking 101** to include most of the issues you want employees to be trained to handle in proper ways. The use of this workbook provides continuity from one manager to the next in proper procedures. This kind of workbook is used in the field so that it does not slow down the work process. Workbooks like this can also be built for other parts of the oil and gas industry.

The Bust

It shows up one day and we are always surprised when it happens (even though we know it is inevitable). At this point we naturally hemorrhage out problem employees. Wages are cut and everyone who is left feels we are lucky to have a job. Safety gets easy at this point except that this is about the time the regulators and/or lawsuits catch up with us. Typically OSHA starts to institute harsh penalties at this point since they are several years behind in being actively involved with us. Now our days are filled with satisfying OSHA requirements, negotiating citations and answering lawyer inquiries. At this point some companies go bust due to high insurance and/or litigation costs. This is why it is smart to establish ways to handle each cycle of the business so that you are prepared for each stage of the process!