

POWER HORSES:

The Teams for Success



During good economic times, employers and employees face stiff competition, and both need an edge. On one hand, organizations benefit from employee growth through specialized training that includes health and safety practices. Employees, on the other hand, need to gain experience and expertise at many levels to grow within the organization. By soliciting and accepting only white-collar input, an organization potentially stands to cripple its own growth as well as stifle employees' growth. The challenge is how to capitalize on an organization's power-horses—its outstanding crew leaders and accomplished workers. The Escondido (California) Public Works (PW) Department discovered a way to harness this experience and expertise: it teamed its power-horses to design various successful training programs.

POWER-HORSE TEAMS

Upper management realized that when expert workers from different divisions team up with peers, their collective field experience and work knowledge provides vital, usable data especially useful for training purposes. In addition, power-horse teams' training programs outperform most other training programs because as city employees, they know city policy, procedures, and practices and can tailor programs to a department's specific needs. PW teams have exceeded expectations by also increasing morale, strengthening department ties by crossing division

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lines, and providing important, user-friendly information. Moreover, teams help author city policy and procedures with this information, which strengthens employee acceptance.

PW management encourages employees to work in teams to exceed individual and/or divisional perfor-

mance. Most teams consist of a small group of individuals committed to a common purpose, a common performance goal, and a common approach for which they hold themselves mutually responsible. Working in small groups promotes buy-in from employees, and it encourages the packaging of information as a way to meet the organization's goals.

Blue-collar employees stockpile a wealth of knowledge from their daily work routine, and management cap-

Cribbing Practice. One of the more difficult skills to learn, it involves excavating beneath a non-moveable structure, e.g., curb, gutter, gas main, etc.

itized on that knowledge by offering to reassign outstanding employees to a team. Team membership boosts employee morale and self-confidence, but it also helps improve the overall organization by empowering employees to address vital issues such as training and pertinent health and safety issues. One power-horse team, Escondido Employee Training Committee (EETC), authored a unique training program for the loader backhoe. In addition to the training program, the team wrote a comprehensive training manual that the San Diego Safety Council currently uses as a training guide. The manual is available on compact disk and has been requested by national and international organizations.

THE CATALYST

In 1990 following a tragic heavy equipment accident involving an employee at the PW yard, the risk and safety manager asked the employees what they felt were hazards in their daily job routine. Their major concerns:

- traffic control;
- loader backhoe operating;
- trenching and shoring;
- respiratory protection;
- confined spaces.

Shortly after completing the interviews, PW beefed up its training in the



Obstacle Course. Backhoe operators must demonstrate the ability to maneuver forward and backward through a delineated course.

identified areas, often contracting with outside agencies or consultants to provide training. When possible, however, PW sought to team its power-horses to provide training curriculum and teach classes.

Though the Department of Industrial Relations reported that more than 5,000 incidents occurred in 1995 that resulted in disabling work injuries related to heavy equipment, the law does not mandate heavy equipment training. Although this sobering figure emphasizes the need for thorough training on equipment, many organizations focus on procedures rather than on training,

often relying on experienced operators to provide a few quick basic training lessons and leaving the rest to innate ability. Not surprising, the report cites inadequate training as the major cause of accidents. However, when PW management sought heavy equipment training, they found no formal program available.

Until the interviews, Escondido's heavy equipment training was no different from other organizations. As Mike Brunner, a long-time PW water employee, now pre-treatment inspector for collections, summed up, "I was initiated into the world of heavy equipment when someone tossed

The EETC put together the following training programs and the curriculum:

Equipment Transporter	6 training hours
Worker & Ground Person Safety Training (All categories must be completed before Ground Person certification is issued)	
Worker Safety & Ground Person Training	4 training hours
Flagger Safety	2 training hours
Dig Alert	4 training hours
Traffic Control	16 training hours
Trenching & Shoring	8 training hours
Confined Space Entry	8 training hours
Backhoe Operator in Training	
Backhoe Operating Techniques	2 training hours
Coaching the Backhoe Operator Course	4 training hours
Field Training (conducted by the Front End Loader Operations)	2 training hours
Digging Bucket Operation	6 training hours
Trenching and Excavating with the Backhoe	6 training hours
Operator Agility Test	2 training hours
Backhoe Operator (Must run a job within your division that two members of the EETC evaluate.)	
Advanced Backhoe Operator	8 training hours
Other programs power-horse teams are teaching include: Respirator Protection (developed in-house); Trailer-ing Heavy Equipment (developed in-house); Bobcat Operator; Industrial Lift Truck (Forklift); Mobile Crane.	



The backhoe operator practices stick control on a spoil pile.

keys at me and asked me to road a backhoe to the PW yard. I didn't even know where the ignition was!"

THE BACKHOE POWER-HORSES

Surprised that she was unable to locate a professional training agency, Sherry McPheeters, the city's program administrator/health and safety, contacted the nearby city of San Diego. "They didn't have a structured training program either, but what they did have was a team of very experienced backhoe operators," she explains. "So we turned to our own knowledgeable backhoe operators and assembled a team to work with the city of San Diego. Together we created this unique and much-needed loader backhoe training program. Our backhoe operators were instrumental in laying the foundation for the training program; in addition, they completed the 'Train the Trainer Program' and now teach the classes at a substantial savings to the city."

Topics the team zeroed on included:

- classroom work;
- hands-on field work;
- agility/performance in the field;
- safety issues involving those working around heavy equipment;
- delivery skills to train others: "training the trainer."

TEAM CRITERIA

Those wishing to participate on any PW team must meet basic criteria:

- Recommendation of supervisor-

team member must possess excellent skills and be seen as such by peers.

- Voluntary position: team member would be relieved of some regular duties.
- Peer acceptance: peers respect team members.

McPheeters explains that upper management considers team memberships a privilege. "If team members cannot keep up their work load in addition to the team's work with a positive attitude, they are suspended or removed from the team. With the backhoe team, we had two members suspended. After one got his act together, the entire team was delighted to see him return. The other member didn't return. We also had two members promoted; one left the team to accept new responsibilities, the other remains a member. Clearly our backhoe team continues to evolve, thus we continue to expand our thinking."

WHY POWER-HORSE TEAMS WORK

Team members know the employees and the "real" safety issues concerning heavy equipment—what better resource to rely on? After employees complete a program, they have been exposed to a team of experts' advice and opinions on safety procedure and a thorough training. As important, the trainers are friends, peers, or co-workers who speak the same language and have already earned the employees' respect.

Tom Christie, a backhoe team

member, explains the importance of peer trainers, "We have a unique collection of people at the PW yard. They not only know each other, but they trust each other and look out for each other; the new guys look to the seasoned guys for guidance."

McPheeters continued, "Moreover, we've discovered that trainees learn more from peer teachers because they can discuss topics openly and honestly. When a peer leads the training, someone can say that they don't agree with a comment without fear of reprisal, and peers feel more comfortable sharing their experiences or adding their personal testimony."

SERIOUS TRAINING

The city's heavy equipment training is mandatory for any employee working around, transporting, or operating heavy equipment; working in confined space; trenching and shoring; and traffic control. This practical program tackles all facets of training as well as thoroughly reviews safety procedures. For each category the employee successfully completes, he or she receives a city of Escondido certification for that category.

The Escondido Public Works Department believes that teams lead the way to success. By involving employees in policy and procedure making, it promotes buy-in from the employees. For the city, team-building encourages win-win situations: the employees feel valued and appreciated for their input, receive recognition for their teamwork, and gain an advantage for promotions. The department wins by gaining useful information from experienced employees; promoting a cohesive and morale-building atmosphere for employees; and grooming employees to assume more responsibilities. Clearly by utilizing power-horse skill and knowledge, the Public Works Department is teaming itself for success!

For more information or to order a city of Escondido PW Heavy Equipment Training Manual, contact Sherry McPheeters, Program Administrator/Risk & Safety, 760-738-1325.

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