

Safety leadership – all aboard

When USA-based Thomas Concrete appointed a new president and CEO, the company gained an ambitious safety programme. With the support of DEKRA Organisational Safety and Reliability (OSR) the concrete producer initially brought the senior leadership on-board, followed by local work teams, and transformed its safety record.

■ by **DEKRA OSR, USA**

Headquartered in Atlanta, USA, Thomas Concrete is a mid-size ready-mix concrete producer with 1200 employees in 80 small and medium-sized mixing plants in Georgia, North and South Carolina. The company's customers are residential and commercial contractors and builders.

A new era for safety

New President and CEO, Alan Wessel, brought with him an ambitious safety vision when he joined Thomas Concrete in August 2013. He had a clear vision: "I care deeply about the wellbeing of our people and I want them to know we care. I knew that if we improved the safety culture, we would improve worker engagement, creativity and business performance."

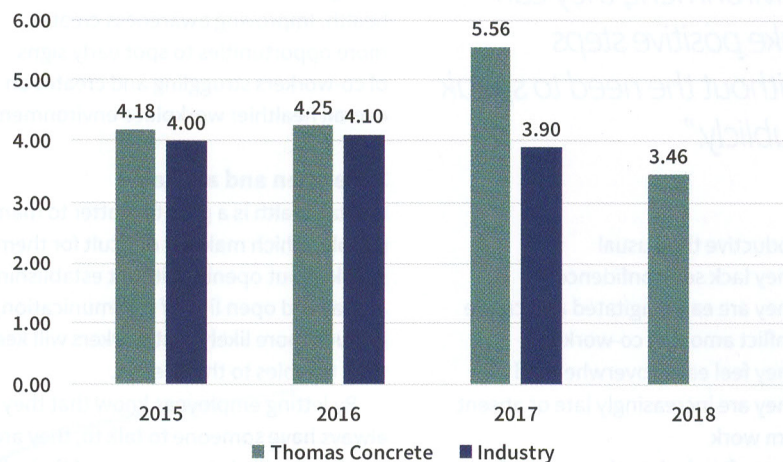
Two years later, when he hired a like-minded Director of Safety and Health, Jon Swierenga, the two men agreed there was a lot of room for improvement.

"We were probably running 20-25 per cent higher than the industry average in recordable injuries," said Mr Swierenga. Drivers often must be up at 1am to pick up concrete at their local plant and

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Thomas Concrete OSHA Recordables vs industry



This figure shows Thomas a year after the safety initiative began with a higher recordable rate (4.18) than the industry average (4.0). But while the industry improved its recordables only slightly from 2015 to 2017 (from 4.0 to 3.9), Thomas Concrete improved its recordables by 20% (from 4.18 in 2015 to 3.4 in 2018). Recordables are defined as the number of work-related injuries or illnesses per 100 full-time employees during a one-year period.

head to the first job site. Heavy traffic in metropolitan cities, narrow roads, driveways and congested job sites are all hazards to a big truck.

Most injuries involved activities around the trucks. "Drivers were going up and down ladders and handling chutes," explained Mr Swierenga, "so we had slip, trip and fall hazards, along with accidents from poor jobsite lighting, irregular walking surfaces and driving distractions. In the plants there were ergonomic problems aggravated by the challenges of working with energised equipment."

Mr Swierenga added that the company needed to integrate new employees and managers as the company grew. It also had to reduce high employee turnover – "not unusual in the trucking business," he said – and improve the culture, which "had come to accept inconsistent, subpar safety performance."

Changing organisational culture

Mr Swierenga knew of DEKRA Organisational Safety and Reliability (OSR) and believed that it was suited to changing the company's organisational culture to improve safety. After meeting with two senior DEKRA OSR executives, he engaged the company to run an Executive Leading with Safety® workshop for the top 16 executives.

"There was a high degree of skepticism when we began," recalled the director of safety and health. "People felt our safety record was not bad and probably could not be improved very much." The workshop in early 2016 by DEKRA's Don Groover and Geoff Cromer lasted most of the day.

The consultants explained how a leader's behaviour influences an organisation's culture and thereby sets the tone and pace for safety. Among other activities, the DEKRA team had the

executives identify what they considered the attributes of a company that demonstrates safety excellence, then rate Thomas Concrete on each attribute. The session ended with the group developing an action plan and each executive developing his own individual action plan.

The group created an Executive Safety Council, with senior leaders from all major company departments, to structure and supervise the safety initiative. In addition, each executive participated in a 360° safety leadership feedback survey, in which his leadership qualities were rated by himself, his boss, peers and direct reports. DEKRA's Geoff Cromer delivered feedback from the survey in private sessions with each executive and mentored the leaders periodically over a period of months.

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DEKRA conducted similar workshops for another 80 managers to the level of plant manager, creating alignment across the management chain with the new emphasis on safety and reinforcing the momentum generated by DEKRA's work with the executive team.

Safety found its way into all meetings of the company, from a more robust new employee orientation, into numerous changes in procedures and job descriptions. Plant managers, for example, are now empowered – and expected – to take immediate action to correct substandard conditions without waiting for permission from above. They personally lead plant safety meetings and are tasked in their job descriptions with making sure every employee knows he can “stop unsafe work without fear of retribution”.

Leadership found novel ways to demonstrate safety's new priority. For

example, two trucks were found to have mechanical issues in the same week. The vice president of operations ordered a company-wide stand down to check all 350 trucks. Volunteers from various departments, including sales, went to each plant – two or three per plant – to perform a hands-on equipment check. The inspections turned up only a couple of minor issues, validating the work of the mechanics and the shops.

The real benefit was that all employees saw the company was serious about safety. And for the first time, all departments, including HR, sales and finance, were engaged in this company-wide focus involving the ready-mix trucks.

Shifting focus from senior to local leadership

During 2014 and 2015 senior leadership was laying the foundation for change and sustainable improvement. Once leadership was on board, it was time to put a focus on local leadership and reducing exposure. As a result, between 2014 and 2018, Thomas Concrete doubled its sales through internal growth and acquisition.

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The average cost of claims for both Workers' Compensation and fleet vehicle accidents was rising steadily until 2017 and has been declining ever since. In 2019 the company is aiming for a 25 per cent one-year decline in injuries as more people look out for one another.

“Our focus has been on being employee and family friendly with predictable time off and flexibility,” said Mr Swierenga, “while still serving our customers. Our employees know that safety is important to us and they appreciate the high standard.” An additional benefit of this change is shown by employee turnover, which is down 15 per cent in three years.

“We have salesmen engaging with truck drivers, customers feeling better treated, people going above and beyond by looking out for each other,” said Mr Swierenga. A recent internal survey found higher scores for employee satisfaction, leadership communication and employee engagement.

Continued commitment to safety leadership

In the next phase of the safety initiative, divisional businesses are identifying what they are doing well, what needs improvement and are coming up with plans to further integrate safety leadership into their local businesses.

“This is not a one-year programme but a way of managing that needs to become embedded in all we do,” said Mr Swierenga. “Changing mindsets and culture takes time. But we're staying the course – it is an intentional journey to excellence.”

Part of this continued focus on safety are:

- quarterly meetings of the Thomas Concrete Executive Safety Council, which includes the company's top five executives who review trends and the progress of the safety roadmap
- monthly meetings of the Safety Operations Team, which monitors KPIs and ongoing tactical safety implementation
- monthly meetings conducted by the plant manager with their operating employees
- quarterly business reviews in each division, which includes summaries of completed safety actions and alerts of what is coming next
- all 150 managers and sales representatives have safety apps on their smartphones that they are expected to use to conduct routine workplace observations, complete with follow-up conversations with employees. Through the app, the contacts are tracked and graphed each month to ensure the company has at least one great worker safety contact per day.

The value of strong safety leadership

Why has the initiative worked so well? DEKRA OSR VP, James Grant, has watched the effort at Thomas Concrete from its early days. “It is a great story about the value of strong safety leadership,” he said.

According to Mr Swierenga, the key factors have been leadership commitment, continued focus, training of senior management and general perseverance.

Mr Wessel said the real benefits go far beyond safety. “People are beginning to feel that they work at a great place that cares about them,” he said. “When people feel that way, they make the extra effort and it shows.” ■