

Stop the Sacrifices



I met Mark Paradies at a safety conference earlier this year, and in conversation he related his personal experience of a fatal accident caused from a fall at height. He mentioned that he had written a letter after the funeral, when he was still upset and angry which he placed in his company's newsletter. It is a powerful and personal expression of someone who has seen the results of a fall first hand.

Leigh W. Sparrow

I have just returned from the funeral for a young man. He died at 23. He was sacrificed to appease the Gods of Construction. What? Surely human sacrifices ended a millennium ago. Yes, they did. Except in certain industries where needless deaths are still offered up for no reason.

A needless fatality

This sacrifice starts on a clear day in Texas. Two men were trying to complete a job that was overdue. They had been working 10 hours a day for 21 days. If they worked quickly, they could complete the job and get home to their families for Thanksgiving. They were working on a scaffold 100 feet above the ground. They had worked on the scaffold for most of the 21 days. They were confident that it was safe but both men wore full fall protection gear. They were secured to a ladder that was welded to the tank that they were working to complete.

The younger of the men needed to move around the other to hammer out a pin. He unhooked his harness so that he would not get tangled in the other man's harness. He decided that a single solid swing of the sledgehammer would knock the pin loose. He didn't hook back up because it would only take a second and the harness would get in the way.

He swung. Despite his youth and strength, his muscles were tired. Instead of a solid blow to the pin, the sledge glanced off the pin at an angle and continued on. It struck a two inch bracket that secured the floor of the scaffold to the tank. The bracket, never having been tested by a blow of such force, yielded. When it gave way, the floor gave way. The young man felt the security of the flooring vanish. Gravity took control. He fell.

After about 20 feet, he hit some supports. The impact shattered his legs. In the wild ride with boards and sledge, he missed any handholds and continued an additional 80 feet to the ground.

After the fall, he was still alive. The Emergency services arrived, collected his fractured body, and delivered it to an emergency room. Despite his youth, strength, and will to live, he died while the surgeons tried to repair the massive damage that the fall of 100 feet caused.

The Funeral

It was at the funeral that I met his 21-year-old wife. They were just starting out in life. They had been married for only 23 months when he was sacrificed. They had so much more of life to live. The sadness in her eyes was immeasurable.

His father was there too. This was his only son - his pride and joy. He had taught his son to weld. Now his son had died on the job. Why? Why did he not tie off? Why did the other man not say something to him? (He had survived because he was tied off.) Why wasn't the bracket able to withstand a single blow from a sledge? Didn't they previously use five inch brackets? Would a five inch bracket have prevented the accident? What if they had taken their normal days off? If his son was rested would he

perhaps have decided to hook up first before swinging the sledgehammer? Or maybe he would have struck the pin squarely? What of the shortcuts they sometimes took to get the job done quickly? How many others had worked for short periods without tying off? Although they didn't think of these shortcuts as reckless, could this have led to additional shortcuts that finally led to his son's death? These are the kind of questions people ask you when you are an expert in the investigation of accidents. But all I could think about was the young man who looked so peaceful in his casket and the sadness in the eyes of his young widow.

Atone for managements sins

Why must this needless sacrifice continue? Surely we must be wise enough to build structures without needless sacrifice of young men to the Gods of Construction? The answers don't require rocket science. They do require good, concerned management. Management that makes sure that shortcuts are completely unacceptable.

To get management's attention I have a suggestion. Make them look into the eyes of the young widow. Not for a second. They should take a good, hard look. Imagine that she was their daughter. And the grief that she feels would not go away when they turned their back. It would haunt them, as it will her, for the rest of their lives.

The company's Chairman, board members, and every manager and supervisor in the chain of command should be in the receiving line. They should look into the widow's eyes. And explain to the young man's father how they had failed to keep his son safe and alive. Then they should leave and sacrifice their first born to atone for their sin - because no sacrifice of money is sufficient to atone for the life of another.

I have a feeling that the attitude across the construction industry would change when deaths become personal to those at the top. The sacrifices would stop when the company president's children are at risk. I think that all of the rules would be taken much more seriously. After one or two sacrifices, short-cuts would become an unforgivable sin.

Many industries with better safety records than that of the construction industry are doing much more to improve performance. Isn't it time that the needless sacrifices stop? Isn't it time for management to look deeply into the mistakes that are being made and stop the practices that cost lives? To start change it takes concerned management willing to commit to end the needless sacrifice.

This is an account of an actual fatality. I took the liberty to assume some details that aren't known for sure. But the details of the accident aren't important. We must stop the tragic, needless loss of life. I hope my brief recounting of the grief can help prevent some future tragedy and stand as a memorial to the young man who died.

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