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Pillar of strength

by Philip Lee

Already a bizSAFE Partner and Star, Boustead Projects aims to be a bizSAFE Mentor this year

Early last year, two workers were building a brick wall on a concrete beam 5m above ground when a sudden gust of wind hit their worksite in the Loyang area.

The wind was so strong that the newly constructed wall, which had reached a height of 1.5m, collapsed. Bricks tumbled to the ground below, and one hit a worker, injuring him slightly.

Recalling this mishap, Mr Howard How, senior corporate safety manager of Boustead Projects, which was involved in the construction, says: "It was a freak accident. Normally, walls built this way do not collapse.

"But in this accident, the cement layer between each brick was still wet when the strong wind hit, but a major contributory factor was worker negligence.

"They had not reinforced the wall with wire mesh during construction. There was lax work supervision.

"Yes, no one expected such a strong wind coming, but if construction procedures had been implemented, the mishap would not have occurred.

"We have been striving to achieve the Alarp target."

Alarp stands for As Low As Reasonably Practicable.

"This is why we place emphasis on thinking out of the box in drawing up risk management strategies – to anticipate even the most unlikely potential worksite hazard," adds Mr How.

As a result of the accident, Boustead Projects, a leading design-and-build engineering division of mainboard-listed Boustead Singapore, laid down a new rule: Such walls should be built up

to 1m in height and left to set overnight before further work continues.

In further re-looking safety risks, the company also got all its sub-contractors to replace the aluminium A-frame ladders with heavy-duty fibreglass ones.

"These heavier ladders are more stable and less likely to wobble and topple over," explains Mr How, 51, a structural engineer by training and a work safety veteran.

He says that if not for the Loyang accident and a minor mishap at another site, his company would have scored a zero mishap record for 2009.

Still, the year ended with the company's AFR (Accident Frequency Rate) at a creditable 0.5 accidents per million man-hours.

Mr How says this shows that overall, its construction workers and work safety supervisors do observe safety rules.

This has been the result of regular meetings – both in-house and at worksites – with everyone involved in any construction project, he adds. This includes the site safety committee that comprises safety co-ordinators, engineers and supervisors from both Boustead and its sub-contractors.

"I visit each worksite once a week and spend an average of two hours inspecting work activity and meeting key site supervisors," says Mr How.

Boustead Projects – which took part in the Workplace Safety and Health (WSH) Council's bizSAFE programme soon after Mr How joined the company in 2007 – is today a bizSAFE Partner and bizSAFE Star.

Its bizSAFE Partner status means that it has encouraged other companies, in this case its sub-contractors and suppliers, to build up their abilities to manage safety through risk management and implementing the WSH management system.

And being a Star signifies that an enterprise has incorporated and maintained all work safety and health procedures in its operations.

Mr How says Boustead Projects has about 80 sub-contractors who have reached varying bizSAFE levels with quite a few at Star level.

He adds: "To encourage contractors and suppliers to join the bizSAFE programme, we have informed all companies which tender for our projects that they must have a minimum WSH Standard with at least a bizSAFE Level 1 certificate.

"Those who are awarded projects must then go on to achieve bizSAFE Level 3 within six months."

Boustead Projects hopes that this year, it will be recognised as a bizSAFE Mentor, the top level of the work safety programme.

The Mentor status is awarded to any enterprise that has demonstrated excellent WSH performance and leadership, and is willing to guide bizSAFE enterprises' progress through the programme.

Says Mr How: "If we are given recognition as Mentor, this will not only say a lot about our high work standards, but it will also give us more authority and clout when advising sub-contractors on how to raise their own levels of safety in the workplace."