How is Your LOTO Program? Any Cobwebs?

Last month I gave a pretty blustering tip about Lock Out/ Tag Out (LOTO). It came from the heart and I hope it woke some of you up and created an interest in reviewing your existing program; or in the worst case starting a LOTO program from scratch. I also mentioned last month, LOTO is probably the most important program you can have in any type of maintenance operation whether it is a manufacturing plant or facility like an office building, school, or hospital.

The first thing to discuss in regards to improving or starting a LOTO program is the management component. Your program must be supported from the top of the organization and also have ‘teeth’. What I mean about support and having teeth is this: When employees violate the rules of the program they must be severely disciplined or terminated. There can be no exception or pardons, no matter who the employee is! You violate the policy; you will pay the price, period!! This sounds severe to many of you but if the program is not taken very seriously someone will be injured or even worse… killed. This needs to be discussed at the highest levels of the organization and human resources must buy into the policy. Because when your best electrician violates the policy you must be prepared to severely discipline them or if appropriate - terminate them.

The first key point of fine tuning your program is to understand that all work on equipment is done in a LOTO mode which means all sources of energy must be placed in a zero energy state. This means all compressed air, steam, hot water, water, electricity, hydraulics, etc.

The hard part about starting a LOTO program is you can’t take the time to write procedures, have committee meetings, and have HR review the policy. If you take this much time you will probably injure someone while you are doing spell check on the policy. I recommend buying a bunch of locks and clips made to hold multiple locks on one switch, have a meeting and training sessions one morning with your maintenance team, and start the program now! Tell them to begin today and start locking everything out before they work on it. Don’t make this too difficult, just start the program. As your technicians find difficulty or no method to LOTO pieces of equipment, have them report it and add it to the list of physical changes that need to be made over time. I would also have them write a very simple procedure for the complicated LOTO items so you can begin to develop your detailed LOTO policies.

As time goes on and more manpower is available you can develop a more extensive and detailed SOP’s for the program. There are also several software packages available which will give you an easy form-based system to write LOTO procedures. They are easy to use and look professional. During this time they can be attached to each work request as either a paper or electronic document. Physical modifications will take some time to implement and put in place to ensure everyone knows where they are and that they will require night or weekend shutdown to perform work in a safe manner. Remember there is always a way to lock it out!
This brings me to a related subject I mentioned last month and that is “Hot Work.” I am sure most of you are familiar with the term but just in case you are not, it means working on equipment that is electrically energized. Many electricians will tell you when challenged that they have to because there is no other way, the customers demand it, or it is easier and faster. Well my answer is “Bull....” Making customers happy or taking shortcuts are never acceptable excuses for killing an employee!

There is always a way to lock out equipment, if you look!

So shake the cobwebs out, go out in the field and test your existing program or if you don’t have a program go buy some locks and start one today.

Never let perfection stand in the way or progress.

Be safe everyone.