Lockout/Tagout: Is it Your Top Safety Priority?

I don’t think my tips of the month have ever talked about safety, not sure why but I guess I have always focused on the process of managing and organizing a maintenance program. Sorry, so this is my fire and brimstone article on the subject.

I guess it hit home when I read in the local paper about an electrical contractor, who I know personally, lost one of his experienced electricians by electric shock. I don’t know all of the details but most of us assume that lockout and tagout (LOTO) (or lack of or working hot) played a role in the death.

This reminded me of numerous organizations that don’t have a LOTO program or if they do, it is not enforced. Those of you that know me personally know my temper is normally in check and the activation fuse is pretty long. When it comes to safety and especially LOTO it burns very rapidly. On several occasions I have stopped my assessment process addressed the plant manager or president and asked if they knew that their LOTO program was broken, and normally get a confused look and a negative answer. That’s when I go a little overboard and say “really” and then I say they should be ashamed and embarrassed. I also remind them that they could go to jail which gets me the same “deer in the headlights look”. I guess no one has talked to them like that since their mom and dad did years ago. That is how strongly I feel about LOTO, it should be your top safety concern and should be talked about daily whether you are in manufacturing or in the facility maintenance business.

In 1978 when I joined the manufacturing world we had a no-nonsense LOTO program which consisted of combination locks and danger tags. The program was so strong that the locks were not needed. The removal of a tag with someone else’s name on it would get you a formal reprimand (three equaled termination) and in serious cases resulted in immediate termination. I once terminated an employee after he got out of the hospital and recovered from flash burns. Some of you are thinking oh my gosh where did this old grumpy pain in the ... come from? When you can kill or seriously injure an employee in a split second because you, as a manager did not do your job properly that burns the temper fuse pretty fast. I spent 26 years directly leading maintenance organizations hurting or killing an employee was always my greatest fear.

LOTO programs are very simple, all you need is the discipline to do it every day and have the accountability in place to audit and ensure everyone takes the program seriously. If you are a technician and not following your existing LOTO program then you are making a personal decision to hurt yourself or your coworker, shame on you! If you are a manager and your program is broken or non-existent, then you are willfully planning on hurting or killing one of...
your employees! I would like to hear how you are going to explain that to the families during the funeral home visitation!

So if you are a technician, use your lock don’t let peer pressure interfere. The lock will ensure you go home in one piece. If you are a maintenance manager get up out of your chair after reading this article, walk around and audit your program. Many of you will be shocked to see what you find.

As you can see my blood pressure goes up when I talk about LOTO so I guess I should have talked about it years ago.

Now, go fix your LOTO program!