



Construction Safety Week 2026: What Owners and Construction Managers Should Be Asking to Prevent Serious Injuries and Fatalities

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The construction industry has made significant progress over the years in reducing injuries and illnesses through better planning, training, management systems, and leadership engagement. However, fatal work injuries have not followed this trend, representing a troubling and persistent problem. This year's **Construction Safety Week** theme, "All in Together," sets out a new approach to address this critical issue.

RECOGNIZE, RESPOND, AND RESPECT: A NEW FRAMEWORK FOCUSED ON HAZARDS

Each May, Construction Safety Week brings the industry together to highlight critical health and safety issues and reinforce our shared responsibility to protect the people who build, manage, and support the nation's construction projects. This year's theme is built on three pillars: **Recognize, Respond, and Respect**, and is a unified call to action focused on high-energy, high-hazard work and preventing serious injuries and fatalities.

The good news: According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024 marked the lowest private industry total recordable incident rate since 2003. However, fatal work incidents have remained relatively steady for the last decade, representing a loss of more than 1,000 workers annually.

Data shows that the customary approach of limiting incidents does not automatically eliminate the events most likely to cause serious injuries or fatalities (SIF). Therefore, Recognize, Respond, and Respect provides construction teams with a practical framework for focusing more directly on the hazards that can change lives forever, thereby reducing serious injuries and fatalities.

Not every incident or near miss has the same potential for SIF. A first-aid case and a near-miss involving falling materials require attention, but they are not equal in severity. Treating all events equally can dilute our attention and cause us to miss key warning signs of a more serious issue. This is why SIF prevention focuses on high-risk events, conditions, and control failures with the greatest potential for harm.

The Campbell Institute suggests that high-risk activities alone are not always a precursor to SIF. A precursor, as defined by The Campbell Institute, is a high-risk situation where controls are missing, ineffective, or not being followed. Work at height, confined spaces, excavation, electrical work, and heavy equipment movement are all high-risk activities. But the risk arises when critical controls for high-risk activities are absent or fail to function. For example, entering a confined space may not be a SIF precursor, but entering one without checking for deficient or toxic atmospheres may be.

For owners and construction managers, this creates an opportunity. We generally do not control means and methods, but we can influence expectations, planning, communication, observation, and follow-through by asking direct questions about SIF potential.

Here's how the Recognize, Respond, and Respect theme comes in:

RECOGNIZE: IDENTIFY HAZARDS AND PRECURSORS

Construction Safety Week begins with **Recognize** because hazards cannot be controlled until they are identified and understood. Tools such as the Energy Wheel, STCKY, or “stuff that can kill you,” and OSHA's Focus Four can help project teams identify the hazards most likely to result in serious injury or fatality.

Additionally, properly communicating the hazards to the team is equally important. Asking about “high-energy hazards” could fall flat if everyone is unfamiliar with the term. Asking, “What's the stuff that can kill you today?” may be more direct and likely to start a useful conversation.

Owners and construction managers can help by asking:

- What can seriously hurt or kill someone during this activity?
- What hazardous energy sources are present?
- What controls must be implemented before work starts?
- How will the team verify that the controls are in place and adequate?

Recognition can also include the concept of cumulative risk, an idea that hazards should not be treated in isolation, as a single hazard rarely tells the full story. Instead, we should consider combinations of hazards that could affect the task. A crew performing steel connections at elevation may be exposed to falls, but the cumulative risk could include fatigue, schedule pressure, restricted access, material movement, and other site-specific hazards. Each factor matters, and added together, they can create conditions where a serious injury or fatality becomes more likely.

Owners and construction managers can encourage their teams to develop pre-task plans that:

- Identify SIF potential for high-risk work activities
- Consider the cumulative risk of an activity when assessing hazards
- Use common language when talking about SIFs, their potential, and precursors
- Ask their teams what STCKY hazards or high-energy sources are present

The goal is not to check a box, but to shift the focus towards the hazards with the greatest potential for serious injuries and fatalities.

RESPOND: BE PROACTIVE.

Once hazards have been recognized, the next step is action. Construction Safety Week's second pillar, **Respond**, is about acting before someone gets hurt rather than reacting after an incident. For many construction activities, the risks should be known before work begins. Examples of this include working at height, operating heavy equipment, handling suspended loads, and working with hazardous energy. If work is planned around the appropriate controls, the risk to workers is greatly reduced.

Once the hazards are identified, the next step is to eliminate or mitigate them. The best protection comes from applying the hierarchy of controls directly: eliminating the hazard, substituting it, or isolating people from it. Administrative controls and use of PPE still have a role, but they should not be the first or only answer when serious injury or fatality potential exists.

Being proactive also applies to how we measure safety. Guidance from the Campbell Institute highlights lagging indicators, such as TRIR, DART, and EMR, that tell us what has already happened, but not where the next serious event may occur. Leading indicators such as percentage of high-risk work, overtime levels, safety observations, and leadership engagement provide better insight into future risk.

Owners and construction managers can support this shift by:

- Tracking high-risk activities
- Asking whether corrective actions eliminate or reduce hazards
- Reviewing field observations for SIF potential
- Treating overtime and schedule compression as risk signals
- Discussing potential trends before issues escalate

This does not mean taking ownership of the contractor's safety and health program. It means using our role to ask better questions, reinforce planning, and enhance visibility around the hazards that matter most.

RESPECT: THE PLAN AND NETWORK

The third pillar of Construction Safety Week is **Respect**. In this context, respect means more than following rules. It means respecting the plan, the people performing the work, the hazards involved, and the need to stop and reassess when conditions change.

Construction projects are dynamic in nature. A plan developed a week ago may no longer reflect current field conditions. Weather changes, equipment breaking down, or materials arriving late can throw us for a loop. When that happens, respecting the plan does not mean forcing the work to continue as written. It means stopping long enough to determine if the plan still works and whether a course correction is needed.

Respect also depends on communication. The Campbell Institute notes that safety information does not flow solely through policy, procedures, or formal reporting. It moves through conversations and relationships between supervisors, inspectors, superintendents, managers, safety professionals, and craft workers.

When a hazard is corrected, or a plan is changed in the field but never reported, the immediate issue may be resolved, but the lesson is lost. Capturing and sharing those lessons learned helps prevent future exposure. This is why respect, communication, reporting, and trust are critical to preventing serious injuries and fatalities.

Owners and construction managers can support this by:

- Encouraging open discussion during planning meetings and site walks
- Supporting stop-work conversations when conditions change or when the plan no longer fits the work
- Empowering the team to report changes or corrections so lessons learned are not lost.
- Making it easier to share observations and corrective actions
- Focusing safety conversations on people and outcomes, not just metrics

ALL IN TOGETHER: LET'S ACT!

The industry has made real progress in reducing and preventing injuries and illnesses, but serious injuries and fatalities continue to occur at a concerning level. Reducing injury rates and nonfatal injuries is important, but we also need to focus more directly on the conditions that lead to the most severe outcomes.

For owners and construction managers, this allows us to contribute meaningfully by setting expectations, asking better questions, reinforcing critical controls, and supporting stronger communication throughout the project life cycle.

This Safety Week, I encourage owners and construction managers to consider five practical actions for their projects:

- Define serious injury, SIF potential, and SIF precursors, ensuring project teams have a shared understanding of what they are and why they matter.
- Ask project teams to identify the hazards and STCKY activities that could seriously hurt or kill someone.
- Strengthen pre-task plans by addressing cumulative risk and changing conditions.
- Track and share SIF-focused leading indicators.
- Encourage open communication and stop-work discussions without the fear of repercussions or blame.

We are “All in Together,” and this mindset should extend beyond Safety Week. It should mean applying these principles every day as we plan, manage, observe, and communicate on every project.

The prevention of serious injuries and fatalities is a challenge, but not an impossible one. By focusing on the hazards with the greatest consequences, strengthening controls, and respecting the role every person plays in safety, we can continue moving the industry forward and safely send more people home each day.

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