Enhance Workplace Communication at 24-Hour Operations

When operations run 24/7, managers and workers are especially vulnerable to communication breakdowns due to the effects of fatigue, shift changes and long breaks built into the schedule. The critical issue at hand is not the length of the work shift but rather the time of day that we have to work it, says Bill G. Sirois, Senior VP and Chief Operating Officer for Circadian. The 12-hour shift is as good and safe in practice as the 8- and 10-hour shifts, he adds. The greater concern is mental fatigue, which is an issue with night shifts. To reduce accidents and disruptions at 24-hour operations, certain measures must be in place, and more importantly, enforced.

Electronic or paper shift log books are essential. They should be used to highlight any abnormal or unusual activity, procedural deviation or safety issues, Sirois says. Record what problems occurred and what was done to correct them. The lead foreman or the supervisor should monitor them and sign off on each shift. Utilize bulletin boards and E-mail or computer networks as well, Sirois adds. Put the bulletin board in a centralized location and use it for one- or two-page briefings. It should highlight the top points and not get cluttered. If everything is running well, a note saying “all systems go” can be just as important. Use E-mail and computer networks to quickly send briefings and other vital information.

Shift overlap and meetings are also crucial, Sirois says. Shift overlaps need not be longer than 15 minutes and meetings can be scheduled weekly, monthly or quarterly depending on the job. At both the shift overlaps and the meetings, the supervisor should go over a checklist. “Consistency is what is especially important. Then it becomes second nature,” Sirois says. “Always have the same points to go over.” Categories to include are process, safety, raw material and miscellaneous.

“Today, with the sophistication of equipment and the speeds at which we produce things, there is an extensive possibility of things going wrong,” Sirois says. Following these rules must be a condition of employment, and employees need to be held accountable. Upper management owes it to employees to explain why these processes are important and how best to perform them.