Safety in the Construction Industry: Are we Barking at the Wrong Tree?

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Abstract

The construction industry is an important industry in the Malaysian’s economy. Much has been said about the quality of the product as well as the image of the industry due to the small percentage of local workers on site. The industry’s welfare and safety record is not at all encouraging. To stop the rot, the government has taken important and significant steps by the establishment of the Malaysian Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB) and the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). These efforts have shown some significant positive improvement in the perception and action of those involved in the industry but we are still far from the standard shown in other developed countries in terms of site safety. This paper is to discuss the roles and responsibilities of the key players in the industry be it the clients, consultants or contractors. The focus is on the ‘upstream’ activities i.e. the pre-construction stage, rather than the ‘downstream’ i.e. the construction phase of a project.

Keyword: safety, responsibilities, upstream activities, Malaysia.

Introduction

The building and construction industry is a dynamic and hazardous industry, making it both unique and challenging to study. This is due to diverse and complex nature of work tasks, trades and environments, as well as the temporary and transitory nature of construction workplaces in the construction workforce. Have you come across an incident involving an express bus causing catastrophic death? In usual case scenario, the driver is always found guilty of reckless driving and will be given a few years prison sentence. On the other hand, what about the company? No charge was taken and of course they are covered by insurance and in no time they can buy a new bus and hire another driver. In other words they got off scotts free! Now let us think, who is in charge of the company, who hires the driver, who is in charge of maintenance, who design the drivers schedule—the answer is the management. Therefore, in many ways they are also responsible for the accident. This example is taken as to compare what is happening on construction sites. In the event of an accident, all fingers will be pointing to the contractor. There are many contributory factors to any accident that happens. This will be discussed further later, but the point here is that in any accident on construction site, the root cause of an accident must be looked into and the contractor or builder is not the only one to be blamed for any injury or fatality on construction site.

The theory of accident causation

There are many theories about accident causation but one of the most simple and easy to accept theory is the Domino Theory. This theory has been developed in the 1930’s by a man called Heinrich and has been modified by several others including Bird (1974) and Adam (1976).

Figure 1 shows the dominoes in Adam’s theory which represents the elements that contribute to the injury resulting from an accident. Basically, the source of an accident is at the management level, example lack of clear safety policy for the project, and this might triggers choosing in competent contractor who do not care about safety resulting in dangerous operation. The unsafe action or operation will result in accidents to happen and workers will suffer.

Another famous theory is The Failure Initiation Theory by Whittington et al (1992). This theory addresses deficient policy in the top of organizational level, suggesting that it stimulates

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