Why many organizations are retiring the Hard Hat….

The battle lines have been drawn, between those who believe that the old sturdy iconic hard hat should be the primary form and head protection and those who believe that the hard hat needs to report to the Smithsonian for duty. Many times, this debate gets heated. I am amazed at the anger of some who claim they will quit the profession if forced to wear a helmet vs a hard hat. Additionally, I am stunned at some safety professionals who protect the hard hat usage based on cost and culture and not safety performance. When faced with this vitriol I believe its because someone has not taken the time to educate both groups as to the why behind this movement.

Last year 850 workers died from falls. An additional 240,000 were injured from falls. Over the past 5 years that amounts to 4,213 fatalities and 1.2 Million injuries. According to the CDC traumatic brain injuries account for 47% of all fall fatalities. Imagine if we could have saved almost half of the fatalities and injuries? How many families would still have their husband or wife and kids have their parents?

The hard hat was born in 1919, over 100 years ago. Its purpose to protect the head from dropped objects. The last technological update to the hard hat was around 1960, that's around 60 years ago. OSHA requires that we must wear head protection that meets the ANSI Z89 standard when there is a "possible danger of head injury from impact, from falling or flying objects, or from electrical shock and burns, shall be protected by protective helmets". ANSI Z89 states "Helmets that meet this standard provide limited protection but should be effective against small tools, small pieces of wood, bolts, nuts, rivets, sparks, and similar hazards".

Further analysis of the Z89 standard will show that it classifies hard hats based on their ability to handle electrical exposure. Class E Electrical 20,000 volts, Class G General 2200 volts, and Class C Conductive no electrical protection. And Types; Type 1 and Type 2. Type 1 offers protection from a "blow" to the top of the head. Type 2 is intended to "reduce the force of impact resulting from a blow to the top or sides of the head".

Both the OSHA and the ANSI standards lack a focus on protecting the head from a Traumatic Brain Injury. In every part of our lives and especially with protecting the brains of our children, we naturally choose a higher form of head protection. When we or our kids, play football, ski, bike, play hockey, or lacrosse we give them helmets to protect their heads? Why? Because we understand that it is imperative that we protect the brain of our children. We know that the brain is the most important organ, it is our Central Processing Unit. Could you imagine giving our Hard Hat to our child or loved one to ride a bike to protect them. I hope your answer is no.

What many leading companies and owners are starting to do is require that their workers and the workers that work on their projects wear a helmet that meets ANSI Z89 Type 1 and a European standard called EN12492. EN12492 is often referred to as the Mountaineering Standard. That is a misnomer, it is really a working at heights standard. EN12492 delivers head impact protection to the front, top, sides, and rear of the helmet. Additionally, it has a chin strap requirement that doesn't allow for easy detachment when the worker is falling. Basically, it performs like a bike helmet. We need the head protection to stay on the head and protect the head during violent and tumbling falls.

Helmets that meet Z89 Type 1 and EN12492 are generically called a Kask style helmet. Kask is an Italian manufacturer of head protection. Kask was the first to propose this higher level of head protection to reduce the incidence of TBI related deaths and injuries. Many leading companies chose this brand because of their leadership in technology and innovation. The styling is quite different that the traditional hard hat and thus the objection to the style change. Another objection is most certainly cost. The cost of a Kask Style Helmet is around 10 times that of a traditional hard hat. Upon further investigation though, a Kask style helmet has a longer shelf and performance life than a hard hat. Typically, 5 years of life (1 year on suspension) for a hard hat and 10 years for the Kask style helmets. (Please refer to your manufacturers instructions for specific performance and shelf life).

The last objection I hear is the OSHA and ANSI do not require these types of head protection. That is true, however it is important to note the OSHA standards are minimum standards, and the ANSI standards are performance based consensus standards. Both are not nor will they ever be cutting edge protection standards. That is why the movement is being pushed by leading companies that care about reducing Traumatic Brain Injuries and Fall Fatalities. The hard hat did a great job for what it was designed for, dropped objects, however it cannot deliver head protection for a worker subjected to a slips, trips and a falls. This is why we must now change to a better technology to protect our vital workforce.

In the end we will look back at this pivotal change as the starting point of reducing fall fatalities and fall injuries in the workplace. As a society we have made substantial strides in improving the safety in our lives from automobiles, air travel, and sporting events. Now is the time to raise the level of head protection and reduce the danger from Slips, Trips and Falls. So put that hard hat on your shelf and put the helmet on your head!

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