

COPING WITH COVID-19: EXERCISING INGENUITY

BY MARY LOU JAY

Construction companies are accustomed to dealing with the unexpected, but the COVID-19 pandemic has been challenging on a completely different level. To make it through, companies have had to react quickly and be creative and flexible.

When businesses started shutting down, the team at Corenic Construction immediately developed a set of procedures for dealing with possible project shutdowns. It was a good call; they had to shut down a project that same night.

“We wanted to know where the tools were and what needed to be removed,” said Brunson Cooper, the company’s managing director. They inventoried what was left on site and what was removed, and the project’s

superintendents took photos, documented the job’s status and got the project owner’s sign off on it.

“We wanted to make sure that everyone was on the same page when we restarted,” said Cooper.

One of TRINITY Group Construction Inc.’s first responses to COVID-19 was to set up new protocols for all of its job sites. “We immediately got them into every subcontractor agreement; we wanted to make sure that the subs were going to have to contractually obligate to follow our policies and procedures on all jobs,” said company President Robert Nichols.

RETHINKING WORKPLACES

Offices started looking a lot different in March and April as companies instituted temperature checks at the door, installed hand sanitizing stations, put plexiglass between seats in conference rooms and marked off social distancing spaces.

Most companies began offering telecommuting options or adjusted schedules for employees at high risk or suddenly faced with childcare responsibilities at home.

Tom Baran, project manager at Ted Turner Company Inc., was able to work from

home in the mornings for several weeks. He supervised his kids while his wife made her work calls, then went into the office at noon. “Another gentleman in our company, a machine operator, has some health issues, and he decided he would rather not be in the office with other people. So we have a list of tasks prepared for him, and he comes in to work at night,” Baran said.

Nichols had TRINITY’s cleaning service do extra cleaning on Monday morning when everybody was coming into work. “I wanted our employees to see the cleaning crew sanitizing things so they didn’t have to wonder about it. I think it gave people comfort that we cared about them, and it helped keep up morale,” he said.

TED TURNER CO., INC.
ARCHITECTURAL METALS

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A commitment made, a commitment delivered!

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F.B.HARDING INC.
ELECTRICAL CONTRACTORS

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Synergi, LLC’s office staff worked from home at first, but now people are voluntarily coming back in. The company investigated using a red-yellow-green wristband system that enables coworkers to quickly identify people’s social-distancing preferences. “Red means stay away even when both of us are wearing a mask; green could mean a fist bump is okay,” said Jonathan Moorley, account director. Synergi will implement the system when the state loosens current restrictions, because it wants people on the high-risk list to feel as safe as possible if they choose to work in the office.

F. B. Harding, Inc. brought in consultants early on to help the company write policies and procedures for the office and job sites. Scott Harding, company president, said the consultant advised them how to more effectively clean tools (use spray not wipes) and also to switch to a less-hazardous, more effective plant-based disinfectant.

The company created a daily job site check-list that includes everything from checking all workers for symptoms and ensuring tools have been sprayed down to limiting work teams to two members and working six feet apart as much as possible unless doing so creates a greater safety hazard.

Ruppert Landscape, Inc. developed a COVID-19 playbook for its 26 branch

managers, according to CEO Craig Ruppert. It covers topics like the precautions the company expects employees to take, doing risk assessments, and dealing with quarantines, as well as the specific restrictions for each of the eight states in which the company operates.

Job site logistics had to change. Corenic Construction ensured that different subcontractors’ crews were safely separated, and arranged staggered working times when that wasn’t possible. Ruppert Landscape reduced the number of people traveling in its trucks from six to four to ensure that everyone had fresh air and access to a window.

All of the contractors instituted procedures to keep track of confirmed and suspected COVID-19 cases. Ruppert Landscape established a centralized reporting place and used a spreadsheet to track everything from people who had symptoms and/or tested positive to all the people they had contact with to their quarantine status and when it was safe to come back to work.

INCREASED COMMUNICATIONS

From the earliest days of the pandemic, contractors stepped up communications to employees, providing information about the disease and updates about how the company was dealing with it. Brunson

Cooper instituted a daily check in with his management team, and he began holding weekly superintendents’ meetings via Zoom. “We have a lot of different levels of experience across our 15 superintendents, and I’ve seen that we’ve really been able to come closer and support each other during this time,” he said.

He plans to continue these regular communications, which have helped bring the team closer together.

Craig Ruppert gave weekly “fireside chat” videos for Ruppert Landscape employees to keep them informed. As time went on the frequency was reduced, but Ruppert continues to communicate regularly with employees via the company newsletter, emails and text messages.

Robert Nichols started sending out email updates every Monday morning, letting his workers know what was happening and providing encouragement to them. He plans to continue that messaging because “people gave me feedback that it meant the world to them to see that email from me pop up,” he said.

To help people who were feeling isolated at home, Synergi added new ways for them to interact. It made the weekly huddle in the company café virtual by using Microsoft Teams, and created an additional virtual meeting called Coffee Connection. Four staff members, chosen at random, answered questions that let people get to know them better. That gave people opportunities to connect with coworkers they wouldn’t normally interact with, Moorley said.



RUPPERT
LANDSCAPE

“THEY ARE RESILIENT AND WANT TO WORK...RUPPERT LANDSCAPE GAVE THESE FRONT-LINE WORKERS A BONUS IN RECOGNITION OF THEIR LOYALTY AND THEIR HARD WORK.”

— BOB JONES, PRESIDENT, LANDSCAPE CONSTRUCTION



“THE COMPANY INVESTIGATED USING A RED-YELLOW-GREEN WRISTBAND SYSTEM THAT ENABLES COWORKERS TO QUICKLY IDENTIFY PEOPLE’S SOCIAL-DISTANCING PREFERENCES.” — JONATHAN MOORLEY, ACCOUNT DIRECTOR

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES

Keeping employees working was a key concern.

Several of Synergi’s projects had to shut down, so shop employees needed work. When government agencies asked if they could make emergency field beds for temporary COVID-19 hospitals, the company team quickly came up with a design and created a joint venture with some U.S. and Canadian manufacturers. “Within a couple of weeks, we were making thousands of beds a day,” said Moorley. Instead of the 16-week lead time required by existing manufacturers, Synergi’s lead time was just one to two weeks.

In addition, Synergi manufactured the hard-to-find hand sanitizer stations for developers and building owners that needed them to safely reopen their office spaces. Trinity Group also worked with one of its subcontractors to supply 300-plus hand sanitizer stands to its customers and 25 for its own offices and building sites.

Synergi is currently working on retrofitting metal railings by wrapping them in antimicrobial copper.

“There’s a kind of positivity behind this; it’s not just doing something that keeps the shop

going, but you’re helping out with the global pandemic effort as well,” said Moorley.

MOVING FORWARD

All of the construction company managers praised their employees for their willingness to follow the new directives, to be flexible as the situation and guidelines changed and to come to work despite their concerns about their safety and the safety of their families.

“They are resilient and want to work,” said Bob Jones, president of Ruppert’s landscape construction division. “Like many companies, we weren’t sure when this crisis began how people would react. Would we have a lot of people being afraid to work and seeking unemployment where they could potentially collect a larger paycheck with the increased aid from the government that was offered? We’ve not found that to be the case.” Ruppert Landscape gave these front-line workers a bonus in recognition of their loyalty and their hard work.

Construction companies recognize that the lessons they have learned in the last six months are going to have a lasting impact on their operations going forward. I think it has forced us to become better, smarter, sharper, quicker and more responsive in how we do things, because we had to; it

was almost a survival instinct,” said Nichols. “I think that there are things that will carry over; it’s the lemonade you get after squeezing 20 lemons.”

Ruppert, for example, predicts that many (but not all) of their meetings will be virtual, because they have found that using the technology can increase their effectiveness and efficiency.

Companies will be able to take advantage of the work they did in response to the pandemic. “I think that we are going to be using many of the different procedures – like the closeout and the enhanced safety procedures – for many years to come,” said Cooper.

Harding said the COVID-19 crisis demonstrated how important it is to remain focused on the important things in uncertain times. “If you create the proper new fundamentals, stay the course and adapt, adapt, adapt, your chances for success are much better than letting chaos rule the day. That’s why I’m so proud of our team. They bought into the fundamentals, and they adjusted and adapted as we made our way through, when it would have been a lot easier to succumb to the chaos.” ■



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