

Voluntary Protection Programs: The Pursuit of Excellence

Hazards are ever-present in the steel plant environment, and a heightened awareness and emphasis on safety is a necessary priority for our industry. This monthly column, coordinated by members of the AIST Safety & Health Technology Committee, focuses on procedures and practices to promote a safe working environment for everyone.

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Why Does VPP Add Value?

Great companies find ways to differentiate their safety cultures from average companies. On 3 September 2008, Fluor Corp. announced that it was chosen by the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) as the newest participant in the Voluntary Protection Programs (VPP) Corporate Pilot. OSHA's Corporate VPP is a premier program recognizing elite companies with an unquestionable commitment to health and safety. Launched in May 2004, the primary goal of OSHA's Corporate VPP was to streamline the VPP application and on-site evaluation processes for organizations that are committed to VPP. Companies that qualify for the program have to meet stringent standards based on OSHA's VPP principles.

Fluor was the sixth active participant to become part of the VPP Corporate Pilot, joining organizations like General Electric Co., the U.S. Postal Service and Dow Chemical Co. Fluor has a history of participation in the VPP on a site level, but the Corporate VPP designation confirmed that safety is one of Fluor's main corporate values.

Some companies see awards like VPP as an opportunity to put a nice plaque on the wall, but Fluor saw the pursuit of VPP as an opportunity to improve health and safety for employees and differentiate its performance from its competitors. The continuous improvement mindset is an essential component of the business strategy. The initiative represented more than just an exceptional

recordable injury rate. The corporate pursuit of VPP was a cause that people could rally around.

How Does the Process Work?

For companies looking for a catalyst to improve their safety performance, VPP offers a road map to achievement. Fluor is recognized in its industry as a leader in occupational health and safety. Fluor has won countless safety awards and has been privileged to receive recognition for being one of America's safest companies. The pursuit of OSHA's Corporate VPP was just another step in Fluor's desire to be the best.

When a company has a sincere desire to lead in a specific discipline such as safety, OSHA's VPP is a natural step forward. The executive team at Fluor chose VPP as their next milestone because they wanted to continue to protect people and share a stage with the safest companies in their industry.

When dedicated leaders commit to a goal, the path forward becomes a lot easier to achieve. With the full support of Fluor's CEO and executive staff, Fluor followed a simple three-phase process to obtain Corporate VPP status.

- **Accepted Into the Corporate Pilot Program** — Fluor has had multiple project sites achieve OSHA's VPP status prior to their interest in the Corporate VPP program. Fluor recognized the on-site value of VPP, and that

is why senior executives were interested in pursuing the designation on a corporate level. OSHA introduced the first phase of the Corporate VPP Pilot in May 2004 and chose six companies to pilot the process. Fluor was not a part of the initial phase, but when OSHA decided to start a second phase, Fluor requested that OSHA consider it for the program. Fluor had to prove to OSHA that it was worthy of the pilot program. The initial approval required several meetings between Fluor and OSHA representatives. OSHA reviewed Fluor's safety performance and how it achieved its success. After the review, OSHA accepted Fluor into phase 2 of the Corporate VPP Pilot.

- **Completing the Application** — The goal of OSHA's Corporate VPP was to streamline the VPP application and on-site evaluation processes for companies with multiple sites around the country. The idea is to recognize a corporate commitment to safety standards. Since the program is designed to help multiple sites, Fluor assembled an application team with Fluor representatives from different projects around the country. For approximately six months, the application team compiled the appropriate information for the application. Fluor had to demonstrate in the application how it applied five VPP principles with consistent practices across the company. Each team member was accountable for specific portions of the application, and the team leaders assembled their contributions for the draft application. Once the draft application was compiled, the application went through several rounds of review from the team and its technical writers. The application team's goal was to create the best application OSHA had ever received. It took seven to eight months to complete the application.
- **On-Site Assessment** — OSHA took five to six months to review the application. The application met OSHA's expectations, and they scheduled visits at two Fluor corporate offices. The on-site evaluation included a review of corporate procedures, and a variety of employees across all levels of the organization were interviewed by OSHA representatives. One representative spent a day in the executive corporate headquarters in Dallas, Texas, interviewing the CEO and his executive staff. A team of OSHA representatives

also spent three days in the Fluor corporate headquarters in Greenville, S.C. Visits at both locations allowed OSHA to gain a full understanding of how Fluor's corporate organization supported safety.

While the OSHA assessment team visited Greenville, they followed a regimented schedule where they systematically reviewed the corporate policies, procedures and practices. Fluor worked hard to also show OSHA how Fluor integrated safety into its overall corporate culture. One of the most successful events on the agenda each day was a group "lunch and learn," where 20–30 Fluor employees ate lunch with the OSHA team and casually discussed how Fluor viewed safety. The informal roundtables offered an opportunity for people to share how they had been personally impacted by the positive safety culture. OSHA closed the on-site assessment with a few suggestions and positive comments. They then returned to the OSHA home office in Washington, D.C., to prepare the report and make a final determination. On 3 September 2008, OSHA announced that Fluor was the newest participant in the Voluntary Protection Programs Corporate Pilot.

What Is the Reward?

It was 18 months from the point when Fluor decided to pursue Corporate VPP to the moment it was able to formally celebrate this milestone. The journey was one of the most fulfilling initiatives that I have ever had the chance to lead. The list of benefits of participating in VPP is extensive. The corporate-wide support helped confirm Fluor's capabilities when it is dedicated to a common goal. Fluor was able to fill gaps it did not know it had and was able to show the value of its proven injury prevention techniques. The partnership with OSHA demonstrated Fluor's confidence in a comprehensive health, safety and environmental management system, and the Corporate VPP designation differentiated Fluor from its competitors. But what impressed me the most about the milestone is the team effort. Fluor employees from around the country, on all levels of the organization, participated in the process. The team rallied around the VPP cause. That joint effort to achieve success for a worthy cause is far better than any plaque or flag that can be displayed. It represents the heart of a company that wants to do what's best for its employees. ♦