

'I'm Sorry, My Son, You've Got Industrial Disease'

Those of us in leadership positions can set a relentless and hardworking example without being cavalier about safety



By [Michael Chandler](#) | November 8, 2009



**Yes, it's my foot, and yes, it hurt, but why am I proud of this image?
Image Credit: UNC radiology**

I've been working in the trades for 35 years and have taken a few injuries along the way: four nail gun accidents—two through the bone; quite a memorable fall from a roof while working alone; tablesaw up the center of my middle finger (SawStop would have been nice right about then).

So, it didn't surprise me much when my incessant coughing during a recent movie date with my wife led to a doctor's visit and the diagnosis of "industrial bronchitis," aka white lung, or in the words of Mark Knopfler, "industrial disease."

But what did surprise me was my reaction, which was sort of "Oh cool, wonder if I have that tune in my iPod?"

It got me thinking about the tough-guy culture I had established for myself and my crew over the years. I remember celebrating with a six-

pack when a new guy sustained his first nail gun injury (“Welcome to the club.”). Sure, I made them all sign the “drug letter” when they were hired—that they will not come to work drunk, sick, or stoned, and will purchase and maintain dust mask, safety glasses, and earplugs and “use them when appropriate.” But a quick look around the job site proves that safety glasses are the only item from that list being even partially enforced. Fall protection? Harnesses are available on every job but are not being used much. The standing joke is “If you fall off the roof you’re fired, 12 in. from the ground.”

I know that part of my style of “leading from the front” means that I’ve generally tried to outwork and out-produce everyone on my team to “pull” them along by setting a relentless example. So, I’ve been the most guilty of climbing without a harness and exposing myself to hazardous conditions in the interest of getting the work done faster. But this means that I’ve been setting a terrible example for the folks who’ve been working with me over the years. And I know that I’m not alone. This tough-guy mentality is pervasive throughout our industry, and our culture (junk food, alcohol, high-school football).

But it doesn’t need to be this way. Those of us who are in leadership positions can set a relentless and hardworking example without being cavalier about safety. We can put the safety glasses on as we get out of the truck and keep a bag in the apron with dust mask and earplugs and really use them when appropriate. We can carry a water bottle and show folks that staying hydrated is just part of the working day. I know that I’ll never wear greasy sunblock on a dusty job site, but at least I can wear long sleeves and a cowboy hat. As we lead, they will follow. It may be too late for me to make much of a correction at 53, but I can encourage others to learn from my mistakes.

Instead of resigning ourselves to hearing aids, chronic pain, and inhaled steroids in our old age, we can look forward to sharing our experience with younger builders well into our 60s, and even longer—which sounds like a lot more fun to me.