



Announcer

It's time for the *IHSA Safety Podcast*.

Ken Rayner:

Welcome to the *IHSA Safety Podcast*. I'm Ken Rayner, and I'm your host. And joining me for today's podcast is Alana Cress from Diamond Tree Care and Consulting. The IHSA recognizes the challenges faced by Ontario's small businesses when it comes to investing in health and safety, and we know and appreciate that building a small business requires having knowledge and expertise in many different areas, including sales and marketing, recruitment of new workers, coordinating the work, ordering supplies, scheduling, and protecting the health and safety of your workers.

So, today we're going to learn about the story of how Diamond Tree Care and Consulting was recently recognized as a small business leader in occupational health and safety by the WSIB. So Alana, welcome to the *IHSA Safety Podcast*.

Alana Cress:

Hi Ken, thanks for having me.

Ken Rayner:

You're very, very welcome, glad to have you here. And Alana, congratulations to Diamond Tree Care and Consulting for being the 2022 bronze winner of the WSIB Elizabeth Witmer Small Business Health and Safety Leadership Award. Wow, that's a mouthful, we got to shorten that down like you do with the Oscars. Maybe we should just call it the Witmers, the bronze winner of the Witmer Award. So, fantastic job, and you've been doing that as an Ontario business since 1995.

So Alana, please maybe first provide us with the work that Diamond Tree Care and Consulting performs and why your owners, the Menken family, why did they decide to make the creation of a safe and healthy workplace a top priority as they grew their business?

Alana Cress:

Yeah, so I'll start with the first half of your question and explain a bit about what we do. So, we're a tree care company based in Georgetown, Ontario, and we really specialize in hazardous crane removals of trees. So we like the really challenging removals, we get to utilize a lot of awesome equipment, and we're very lucky to do so. We do residential tree work, as well as holding contracts with a lot of municipalities in the area. And for them we would do utility hydro clearing, specialty tree removals and pruning.

So to your next question, the reason why the Menken family took the necessary step to improve health and safety was not based out of any catastrophe, very thankfully, because a lot of companies have that as a result. But it was more that they saw the value in that it's a family business, right? The employees that are coming to work are family, even if they're not blood family, it's a community, and they realize the importance of how much injuries impact everybody in the community. It's not just the one person that's the victim. So, that's where it kind of stemmed from.

We've been a member of WSIB our entire existence, and early on, they started offering programs that would incentivize companies to improve their health and safety management system. So our owner at the time took those courses very early on. They were a similar incentive based program, so you could reduce your WSIB premiums, and that's where it kind of started. I'd say it was very gradual. Very, very gradual. And the basis of it was to create a safety culture.

It really took off when the two sons, who are now the co-owners, Dale and Cody, went to school and became members of the larger network in the industry. They did the apprenticeship at Humber College in '02 and '04, and they came back with a lot of safety knowledge because in that program they really ingrain in you the value of PPE [personal protective equipment] and the value of working safely. So they brought that back and developed the safety culture that we have today. And again, it didn't come with no resistance or anything, people are very set in their ways. And very early on in this industry, people didn't recognize PPE as a valuable thing, but it came slowly and people started to enjoy leaving work not as beat up as they were, because now they have the equipment to keep them safe. And it was a slow growing, and once they tried a hard hat and okay, that wasn't so bad and I feel good about it, then the rest of the PPE kind of followed suit. And eventually, they were fully geared up, ready to go and to the level of PPE that we use today.

And again, the big thing is letting the company see the value in the safety. It's very gradual, but once you take that step and you see the value, it's really easy. It's a snowball effect to be like, okay, you know what? We see the value in this one thing. What if we try the next? And that's where we kind of got our safety culture from that we have today.

Ken Rayner:

Alana, there's a great video on the Diamond Tree Care and Consulting website, where I think it's 22 or 23 trees you remove in a single day. It is an amazing video that really demonstrates the work that you do, and the nature of the high-hazard work that you do and how you do it safely. So, for anybody that's listening to this podcast that wants to get a better visual look at what it is that Diamond Tree Care and Consulting does, please go to their website and check out that video because it's fantastic.

So you mentioned a couple of investments that you made. Alana, we talked about education and training. So, over the past 28 years of being in business, what are some of those other really important investments that Diamond Tree Care and Consulting made in occupational health and safety that helped them become a recognized health and safety leader in Ontario?

Alana Cress:

Yeah, well, taking it back to the very, very basics of PPE, that was definitely one of the best investments. I mean, using chainsaws every day, there's so many risks involved with that. So, taking the steps to

actually do that and have the equipment for your personnel that fits them well, was definitely one of the best investments. Chainsaw pants alone save so many lives, they are so valuable to have. So, definitely PPE is a big one.

And the other big one that I think is unanimous across the company would be attending the conferences and continued education. We have a lot of members of the ISA, which is the International Society of Arboriculture. We hold a lot of ISA certifications, whether it's tree risk assessment qualifications or certified arborists, where they host conferences. We go to that and that is where we learn a lot about the industry, new practices and everything, in terms of safety and approach. So, that is another big investment that we have recognized as something that's really, really valuable to continue.

So I'd say between the PPE, conferences and education, and then our most recent one would be joining the Health and Safety Excellence program. It's a smaller investment, I would say. Thankfully, the cost to join is not very large, but the amount of benefit we've gotten out of it far exceeds any little cost.

Ken Rayner:

Excellent, and Alana, reading through your WSIB submission you did for the excellence awards, and one of the things that you touched on, I mean, you talked about PPE and you talked about training. But as important as those things are, you also touched in your submission on some of the administrative controls that you've really seen a lot of benefit with, like version control. So making sure that when that worker, even if they're completely decked out in all the required PPE, if they're taking the wrong procedure with them that hasn't been updated and they're taking it out into the field and they're using that, that's as dangerous as not wearing PPE in some regards. Right? So, really great to see, not only have you made that investment in the PPE and the likes, but you're also taking a look at those administrative controls to help build up your occupational health and safety system.

Alana Cress:

Yeah, that was definitely a much more recent step, but I'd say a big investment for sure, was creating those controls and kind of starting at the framework stage and kind of helping develop our health and safety management system into something that could grow, flourish, and really hold strong as we expand as a company.

Ken Rayner:

And Alana, fair to say Diamond Tree Care didn't do this completely on their own, you had some help, right?

Alana Cress:

Oh, absolutely. Yeah, our consultant with IHSA is fantastic.

Ken Rayner:

So maybe you could maybe just share with our listeners a little bit more about the assistance that you receive from Ontario's health and safety system, being the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and

Skills Development, WSIB, the Infrastructure Health and Safety Association. What have you received from those partners over the years to help you in your quest to create a health and safety workplace?

Alana Cress:

Yeah, so initially, like I said, we did a couple WSIB courses way early on, but most recently, we joined the Health and Safety Excellence program, our consultant is IHSA, and they have offered us way more support than I could have ever imagined for this program. Initially signing up, it seems overwhelming the amount of topics and things you need to complete and that you're submitting it to the WSIB, it seems like a really big deal, and it is. But IHSA has made it very clear, very supported, and alongside their free resources for anybody to access, but they've offered even more resources beyond that to make sure that we're on a path that is sustainable and that we can really implement quality changes in our business.

Ken Rayner:

Right on, Alana, and this is a long-term play, right? So some, I think there are businesses out there that sort of get overwhelmed if they're looking at what they're trying to do in a week or a month, but this has been over a course of years. And I think maybe some businesses underestimate as to how much you can accomplish in a year when you're doing a little incremental work week after week, month after month. Would that be similar to what you experienced?

Alana Cress:

Absolutely, absolutely. So we took on the five topics, which is the maximum you could do, but after... well, during the first year even we realized, hey, if I just chip away, it's manageable. It's really manageable. Actually, it was so manageable to the point that you're motivated to start in other areas too, where you can start to improve maybe some training programs or maybe an approach to health and safety meetings, everything like that. So, once you start chipping away from it or away, you start chipping away at it, you can see that it's much more manageable than you initially thought. I think starting seems really intimidating, there's so many areas you have no idea where to really start, but it's just starting somewhere.

Once you get going, you can see that it's more manageable and likely more and more people will want to get involved and help make the changes. So then all of a sudden your health and safety team's gotten so much larger, that you can start to hand work around and make it much, much more manageable for everybody.

Ken Rayner:

Alana, you talked about utilizing others. So, how about your own employees? I know again, in your submission you talked about reaching out to your employees and getting their sense as to not only what was going on currently with health and safety and how they felt about it, but also what they were looking for to improve upon, and you got their suggestions to be able to look at what you needed to focus on next. Is that right?

Alana Cress:

Absolutely. The value in employee feedback far exceeds what managers can put together. The biggest thing for us, like you were mentioning there, was figuring out what their immediate concerns were, or how they interpreted what health and safety programming we had already. And that was the really big basis for how we got started with the excellence program, was figuring out, okay, well, what gaps do we think exist and what gaps do our employees think exist? And then kind of bridging that to see where our focus area should be.

So, having those conversations on the floor or in the shop or however the company's structured, and for us it's the crews, going to the crews and the crew leaders and saying like, "Hey, what is your biggest concern in a day-to-day? Or how do you actually interpret this?" And getting that feedback, that's where you get the buy-in as well. Once you start to get programs going, that's where our employees were more on board because they had a voice, they had an opportunity to make change in their workplace and an opportunity to change the change thereafter because we have that check step. We go back and we revisit all of our programs to say, "Hey, how is this working? How is that policy? How is this new approach?" Because without their input, they are way less likely to champion that when management's not there. So, it's important to figure out what they are doing and have them involved in the conversation to actually have something that's living and breathing in the workplace.

Ken Rayner:

Alana, a lot of, I believe that certainly some of our listeners are health and safety managers. You're the health and safety and environmental coordinator for Diamond Tree Care and Consulting. Could you maybe just explain what it's like to work for a very committed owner who is championing health and safety? Because I know that's not always the case and we have health and safety managers out there that may struggle with that a bit, perhaps because there's not complete alignment with senior management or the owners. What's that like when you're sort of lock and step with that ownership group?

Alana Cress:

It's very fulfilling. We are very lucky to have the structure we do. One of the co-owners, Cody, is one of our crew leads. He's on crew every day out with the actual employees on the floor, right? So they get to see that kind of investment from management every single day. And that really, really matters to how the rest of our employees act around health and safety, especially knowing that one of the senior most people is involved in using that health and safety mentality every single day, wherever they go. So, that has been absolutely incredible.

And then from the administrative side, I'm not on crew every day. I have so much support to research, to invest, to help make the programs better on a document side or on the administrative side that we get to put onto crew later on. So, it's a really great hybrid of administrative support and employee support for creating this health and safety program, where management wants to be involved, they want to know the changes. They want to be in the conversation of how they can help to make this workplace and culture much more sustainable, much happier, and safer for all of our employees at the end of the day.

Ken Rayner:

Amazing, and I agree with you, it's a critical component. Having a committed employer, owner, having a committed supervisor on a site, is absolutely paramount to health and safety. So, that's fantastic. I'm very glad you're getting that support.

Alana, what other advice would you provide to other Ontario small business owners who would like to follow the example that Diamond Tree Care and Consulting has made?

Alana Cress:

My biggest piece of advice would be to start as soon as you can. It is so much easier to get your footing and foundation when you're smaller. And if you're still working out of one site, it's that much easier, because you have everybody in the same site every day, it's a lot easier to implement a health and safety management system for your company. If you're spanning over multiple yards or multiple sites, it gets more challenging. So the earlier you can start, the easier it'll be. It also comes down to a size thing as well. If you are very growth-minded, that's great, but make sure you have that management system in place early enough that it is able to grow with your company needs.

Another one would be, get people involved. Get everybody involved, as many people as you can in the conversation about health and safety. You never really know who might be paying attention more than others or who really has something to say about the safety in the workplace. So, you're better off talking to everybody you can about the thoughts about health and safety or where their concerns may lie, or an area that could be improved that you never even thought of. So, bring as many people in as you can to discuss that and check in with them on a regular basis about how the program's going. The more people are involved, the more likely there is of a higher buy-in, and people will actually champion that when the company grows, and when you can't be around everybody all the time. So, it's really important to start soon and start talking to people and getting everybody involved.

Ken Rayner:

I love that, Alana, that's fantastic, because I think of a small business owner. She or he, as they're starting out the business, number one, are probably recruiting people that they know to work for them. Those are some of the first employees that they bring on board. So, even more of a need to protect those that they care about. And number two, as they grow their business, so if you have one site operating or one location operating and you're there all the time as the owner, you can probably somewhat be the occupational health and safety system yourself, right? Because you're going to be overseeing everything and you're going to be checking everything, but as soon as you now start to have multiple locations and you can't be on all places at once, you need to rely on a system to be able to ensure consistency across the board. And it sounds like that's exactly what you've done, so love that advice, thank you so much.

I'm interested to know what Diamond Tree Care and Consulting is focusing on improving on in '23 and '24. So, what are your plans of, you've got to this point? How do you continue to improve your system and make it even safer?

Alana Cress:

Yeah, so two of our main focus areas this year are definitely the reporting side of things. So, we are working through our incident reporting, investigation and analysis, really refining that program. Thankfully, we haven't had to use it at the moment yet, knock on wood, but having that in place because if we were to need that program, it's too late. Right? Having something in place because being a small business, we know everybody at the company, everybody is family. So if something happens, nobody's going to be in a good mental place to go on the Ministry website and figure out what we need to have or go to WSIB and figure out what we need to have. So we kind of thought, you know what the right step would be to get a program in place, where it's just second nature, you grab the documents, they're already ready, and you go out and do that investigation.

Another one that we're really excited for is more training programs. We're really enthusiastic about our training and making sure that everybody has as much training as they can. It's a big part of our workplace, it's dangerous, we work with really dangerous equipment, so we want to make sure everybody has the training, as much training as they can and feel confident in the things they do.

So some of them, the things we're working on is an open-tree-crown climbing competency and program, more rigging technique programs, more in improved aerial rescue and other rescue scenarios, and better chainsaw programs. We're also developing a complete ground worker training program, which will better equip and prepare our newer staff for the skills that would be acquired and required in their first couple of weeks with us. So, trying to give them a better idea of what to expect, but also give them the tools they need to succeed early on in their careers in tree care. Safety is obviously very important to us, so having that kind of grounds person training program will help eliminate more of the risk with newer people coming into the industry. So they have a better grasp of what is expected of them and what hazards to look out for, prior to starting on crew.

So, we're really excited about those and we really see the value in them, and we're excited to get them going, so yeah.

Ken Rayner:

Alana, thank you so much for sharing your story today. That's fantastic, and I hope that for other small businesses out there, they're able to take a look and listen to what you've done and know that it is possible. Right? It does take a lot of effort, but like anything else in this world, anything that's worth it takes some effort, right? And you're not alone, there's organizations like IHSA out there that can help you along the way and give you the resources you need to make sure you're creating that safe and healthy workplace. So, thank you Alana, so much for joining us today and sharing your story.

Alana Cress:

Yep. Thanks again, Ken, for having me on here. And all I can say is that health and safety is definitely worth the investment and start small, but it snowballs into something really great.

Ken Rayner:

Fantastic. Thank you again, Alana, and thank you listeners, for listening to the *IHSA Safety Podcast*. And be sure to subscribe and like us on your podcast channel and visit us at IHSA.ca for a wealth of health and safety resources and information.

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