IHSA SAFETY Podcast

transcription

Episode 122: A Day in the Life of a Supervisor Part 1 – Taking Care of Business

Host: Holly Baril
Guest: Andy Fournier

Holly Baril:

Today is your first day as the new construction supervisor. You are both excited and nervous. There is so much that you're responsible for. How will you remember every regulation and all the rules that are in place? You've earned this moment. All the training, the long days, the years of learning from the ground up have led you here.

But this role is more than just being in charge. It's about leading people, managing hazards and their risks, keeping the site compliant, and making sure every beam, every bolt, and every decision aligns with the plan.

Announcer:

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

Holly Baril:

Welcome to "A Day in the Life of a Supervisor Part 1 – Taking Care of Business", the podcast that builds knowledge where construction meets compliance. I'm your host, Holly Baril, and in this episode, we'll explore the legal responsibilities, safety standards, and regulatory framework that every construction supervisor needs to know.

Whether you're managing a small crew, or overseeing a major infrastructure build, understanding your legal duties isn't just smart, it's essential. So grab your hard hat and your handbook and let's get into the details that keep construction compliant.

My guest today is Andy Fournier, construction supervisor for over 29 years. In this time, Andy has performed various roles such as structural steel erection, foreman, general foreman, to construction manager, working in various projects within Canada and South America. So welcome, Andy, and thank you for offering to do this podcast with me.

Andy Fournier:

Thanks for having me, Holly. Nice to see you again.

Holly Baril:

Yes, nice to see you as well. And so, as you know, we are going to go through different questions that focus on the legalities of a construction supervisor. And again, we want you to give us...You've been doing this long enough, so you've seen the good, the bad, the ugly. We're going to want some recommendations that you may have for new supervisors. What are some of the challenges you face? That's kind of what we're going to have a discussion about here today. Sound good?

Andy Fournier:

Yes.

Holly Baril:

Okay. So what do you enjoy most about being a supervisor on an Ontario construction project?

Andy Fournier:

For me, I would say it's the challenge and the people...working with people. So, obviously, it's nice for me having done...The first 10 years was a lot of structural steel erection; kind of becomes, not say monotonous, but it's the same old.

And then, transitioning into projects that are multi-trade, different clients, that sort of thing. And obviously, the challenges that come with scheduling, interacting with people, trying to make sure everybody gets along. Those are the day-to-day challenges that I enjoy. And then, obviously, the people you meet.

So we spend a lot of time at work. So you get to know a lot of people, different backgrounds, different, obviously, trades and upbringings. So that part I enjoy. It's nice to just talk about different stuff with people, and just get to know them, and then try to make them all work together to make it all happen.

Holly Baril:

So it sounds like the busy hustle-bustle schedule, be on schedule, hire people, make everyone work, get the job done, it sounds like that's kind of what you're thriving for, right? The busy and the final product.

Andy Fournier:

Yeah. Because we've been on projects where things become regular, almost routine, every day for a period of time, and there's no challenge there. And it's nice to get the quiet time and catch up on stuff, but you don't feel... At the end of the day, for me, I feel like I want that challenge. I want to feel like I've accomplished something. So definitely, yeah.

Holly Baril:

Like your blood pressure's going up, you know? Okay, that's good. So in your opinion, what do you think is the most important supervisor task on a project?

Andy Fournier:

For me, it's like keeping your finger on the pulse. So obviously there is multi-facets to what we do. Safety obviously is priority and has become, I think, especially nowadays, the number one priority. Obviously, we want to see everybody go home unscathed, happy, and also for them feeling like they've achieved something for the day.

But definitely, the other aspect is the planning, right? So with that comes, if you don't really have your stuff together and you don't plan properly, I feel there's a ripple effect. So that leads to people being

frustrated. Then it also leads to corners being cut, people feeling like they need to do something to meet the original plan or the schedule, and it just leads to almost chaos.

And I've seen it several times. And sometimes it's our own fault. Many times, it's the client we deal with, or it could be engineering, and so on, or just a change of plans for whatever reason, that you're missing something or something doesn't go as planned.

Holly Baril:

Right. So you always have to make sure that you are kind of 10 steps ahead of everybody, so that when the plan is failing or it needs to change, that you can kind of set it together, so that it doesn't... like you said, the ripple effect to the employees, and then they're feeling frustrated, when, really, they don't need to be.

Andy Fournier:

No. And for me, I always tell the guys, "If you don't see me running around screaming, mad, throwing my hard hat, then there's no reason for you to be doing it either."

Holly Baril:

I love that.

Andy Fournier:

And then the other piece of it is that, if it takes us a day longer, a week longer, a month longer, no one's going to remember how quick you got the project done. But everybody remembers somebody who lost their life on a project, or, obviously, someone who maybe lost their living, with maybe just having being paralyzed and changing everything at their home.

So we get caught up where we want to do the best we can, and we seem to be driven for schedule. It's maybe in us as human nature, but definitely, that's where the things happen and people get hurt, right? So you're just trying to constantly remind people that it doesn't matter if we're behind schedule. If you need to wait and take an extra hour, or even a day, to do something right, so be it. We'll adjust, and no one's going to remember that at the end of the job.

Holly Baril:

Okay. So that actually brings me to two different things. So the first one is, how do you continue to improve your skills regarding those critical tasks that you just talked about, right? Like the planning and the safety? And so, what are you doing to make sure that you're always up-to-date?

Andy Fournier:

So obviously there's a few aspects to that, but for me, routine, for me, is huge. The guys start at 7 a.m. Whether we're working six tens or four tens, I'm always here typically at 6 a.m. So an hour before. It gives me my time to plan a bit, touch base with our safety team, the supervisors ahead of time, just to talk out the day, any challenges that might be coming.

We'll do the same throughout the day, and at the end of the day as well, again, just trying to keep our finger on the pulse.

Holly Baril:

Okay.

Andy Fournier:

The other piece of it is just trying to routinely take the time as well to...I always say it's like a leaking dam. So you've got 10, 15 holes, and some holes start leaking water, you go and you plug one up, and then you just keep circling to where the water's leaking the most. But by the time you get to the last one, the first one you patch just starts to leak again.

So you're constantly just trying to circle with all aspects of engineering, safety, people. Especially, what are their attitudes? How happy are they? Are they rushing? So I find I'm constantly just trying to be in a routine to touch base on every aspect of what we do. And for me, that's been successful, I guess. But it's never perfect, but you do the best you can.

Holly Baril:

Okay. No, that's great, actually. Now, you were talking as well when we said, "What are some of the supervisor tasks," and you mentioned those deadlines. And who's going to remember that we finished on time. But they're going to remember that fatality because we know that that's true. So how often do you feel that a project deadline is realistic or unrealistic?

Andy Fournier:

I would say most of the time it's not. And I think... We all know some of the clients or most of the clients that we work for, they give you a very short amount of time to bid the project. So as a standard, a lot of times it's like six weeks depending on the size of the project.

In six weeks, they want a detailed cost breakdown, they want the schedule, they want all your safety procedures and so on. So you've got this team just collecting the information and trying to put together as detailed of a package as you can. You never ever think of all the little things. And then, even more so, they say, oh, just go perfect case scenario as if the weather's not going to be an issue and stuff. And then when it does, we'll talk about that, right?

So when we're on a project like we are now, for even five years or 10 years, a day here and a day there adds up at the end, and then they look at their budget after and say, "Oh, we didn't account for 15 days in the summer for rain and stuff. We only thought it would only be 10." And so, then you end up arguing about who's paying for those delays, right? So often it's optimistic, not realistic.

Holly Baril:

Yeah.

Andy Fournier:

So I told my dad that a long time ago. He was the general foreman (GF), and he says, "Listen," he said, "I'm the GF, you're the foreman." And he says, "It's my job to push the schedule." And I said, "Well," I said, "I'm your son and also the foreman." I said, "It's my job to be realistic, and not optimistic."

Holly Baril:

How did that end?

Andy Fournier:

Yeah, he actually chuckled after. Another gentleman was there and thought it was pretty funny. But again, we get caught up in this piece of paper with colour on it…

Holly Baril:

Right.

Andy Fournier:

...and somehow, that's supposed to drive what we do in the corners we cut out there to achieve goals that often are unrealistic, or they change, right? They're realistic when you start, and then, as the thing... extras come in, all that stuff, but nobody wants to move the end date. "Well, we still got to be done by this date." Okay, so cram more people, more hours.

Holly Baril:

Yeah.

Andy Fournier:

It's a recipe for something to happen.

Holly Baril:

Right. So more people, more hours, cutting corners. I mean, those are all things that lead to issues in the end anyway, right?

Andy Fournier:

Yep.

Holly Baril:

So with that, adding more people, and you were talking about dealing with people on the worksite and stuff, how do you manage the different kinds of personalities that you have encountered?

Andy Fournier:

So I've seen them all. I think it's like... For me, I treat it like coaching hockey or anything like that. You get to know who you have on your team, you try to team them up with the people they work with best. However, that also changes depending on little tips they may have, or...And a lot of times, the issues they're having have nothing to do with that work.

It's stuff that's going on at home, pressures they may have financially, or with their wife, or their kids, or what have you. Could be pain. Could be suffering, even mentally or emotionally. Or if you get into drinking and drug problems.

Holly Baril:

Okay.

Andy Fournier:

So all those aspects come to play. So it goes back to circling with trying to speak to these people, touching base. Because a lot of times you start, everything's really rosy, and people are working well together. And then, months later, it's like, "Hey, what's going on? Why is Bill not talking to Frank anymore?" "Well, he was tired of the way he chews his food in the lunchroom, and he leaves his boots there." It's just so minor.

So again, just trying to talk to the guys, "Hey, how's it going?" And then when I get the opportunities to talk to someone one-on-one, or even those two, three people conversations, not just talking about work, right? "What are you doing this weekend?"

Holly Baril:

Right.

Andy Fournier:

"How are you feeling? Hey, are you tired? We're working six tens for the last three months. How do you feel about that? Is your wife okay with it? How are the kids doing? Are you getting time to spend to go fishing?" And another piece of that is, we've always told the guys, "We work to improve our lives, but if you're not around your life to enjoy it, what's the point?"

Holly Baril:

Right.

Andy Fournier:

"So if you need a week off to go fishing or what have you, take it. We'll work around it. Just try to give us a heads-up."

So the other thing we've done too is, sometimes your best workers are the guys that don't get along with anyone. So I've gotten rid of them. I've seen crews where I've got 15 guys, and my lead guy was by far our best worker. But all the other guys that tried to do stuff, he was always knocking them down, like, "You're an idiot. You don't know what you're doing." That sort of thing. So you talk about morale.

Holly Baril:

Right.

Andy Fournier:

So as soon as I got rid of him, all of a sudden the 14 guys started working really well together…

Holly Baril:

Wow.

Andy Fournier:

...And everything...production started going up.

Holly Baril:

Wow.

Andy Fournier:

You don't realize it sometimes that it slows down the production and obviously the morale piece, right? If people are happy and they're enjoying what they do, and they get up in the morning and they want to come to work, that's half the battle.

Holly Baril:

100 per cent. Yeah.

Andy Fournier:

They'll do anything for you.

Holly Baril:

And it's funny that you say that, right? Because sometimes people...I shouldn't say they don't know this, because I think I feel like everybody knows this. There could be that one person, just like you said, that ruins the whole workplace, and until you remove that one person, it'll just keep going the way it is, and then you're going to start losing other good workers.

Andy Fournier:

Yeah.

Holly Baril:

Because they're going to go somewhere else where they're either respected or treated better, and then you're in a bigger jackpot.

Andy Fournier:

Yeah.

Holly Baril:

So that's good that you can recognize that. Now, you've given me a couple, but do you have any other tips to handle all these different types of personalities?

Andy Fournier:

I feel like...No, it's, again, just getting to know them. And I think, for me, is trying to keep the morale as high as possible. So the guys... I've seen guys that are typically introverts, or don't really communicate well, but you put them with a bunch of people that do, and it brings them to life a little bit.

So it'd be no different than a happy person who works with five miserable people. Odds are, he will probably become miserable after a while, right? So again, trying to move people around, keep things not too monotonous…

Holly Baril:

Exactly. Yeah.

Andy Fournier:

...And having them feel appreciated, I feel, is a big piece.

Holly Baril:

Yeah, that's a good tip, and it is a good skill to have too. You're absolutely correct. You have to get to know your people. They're not just there to work. They go home to something.

Andy Fournier:

Yeah.

Holly Baril:

And getting to know them and asking those questions makes them feel, yeah, like they're part of a team, and they will do more for you. And I'm sure you know that over the course of your years that

the way you treat people, they're going to treat you just as good in return.

Andy Fournier:

Yeah. Absolutely.

Holly Baril:

So over the course of your career, are there any tools, or resources, or training that's provided you with really good knowledge and understanding of the Act and the different Construction Regulations?

Andy Fournier:

Yeah, quite a bit. I mean, I feel like the training is definitely helpful. You get sometimes a high-level learning, if you will, but then you always touch base on things that you can relate to on your various projects or your background.

In addition to that, having the field experience. So trying to apply what you've learned, and seeing what works, what doesn't work. And some things work better for others than for other people.

Holly Baril:

Yeah, trial and error.

Andy Fournier:

Yeah. I find online now is definitely...a lot more information that you can retrieve. AI has been a game-changer for us too, and I'm sure you hear it all the time, but you want to put together a manual or a JHA... We have a library full from years that we've developed them, and you put that into AI and say, "Hey, can you create a JHA for what have you?" And it's picking up not just what you've created in the past, but all these other things that you tend to forget about, because it's going through the database of the Green Book and all the bylaws, and...

So it almost sparks up more thoughts of, "Oh shoot, we need to include this as well. We never even thought of that," right? So yeah, I find that's been a game-changer for us in the last year. We've been utilizing it quite a bit.

Holly Baril:

Okay. Interesting. I thought, for sure, Andy, you would've said that, yeah, your greatest knowledge would've come from IHSA and myself, Holly, as your trainer. But anyway, it's okay. Don't worry about it. I'm good. I'm not insulted at all. But it's okay.

Andy Fournier:

Okay.

Holly Baril:

But the one thing I know for sure is, when you did supervisor training and we talk about the log book, and I was always impressed with your log book, because I'd always make you bring it in…

Andy Fournier:

Yeah.

Holly Baril:

...To show everybody else... yeah... how wonderful you fill it out. So I just want you, maybe, to tell our listeners here: why is it so important for you to do that log book as meticulous as you do, with your colour-coding things? You follow every rule. You should be teaching people how to fill out their log book. So why do you do it like that?

Andy Fournier:

So I never did a book until I met a gentleman, which I'm not going to say his name, but in town. He was a supervisor, an iron worker by trade, and I believe he was the general foreman for erecting steel here at a project where basically two of his guys got killed. And, lo and behold, he had written in his log book every day that he didn't want to use a certain type of clamp that they were using, as opposed to using steel slings to hoist these beams.

And he logged it several times, saying, "I don't want to use this type of device. I told my superintendent, and he's telling me to keep using it." And obviously the two people got killed. So when he was in the court, basically the company was trying to put it on him. And this was back in 1990, roughly. And he said, "Andy, the worst feeling is sitting in a courtroom, knowing I haven't done anything wrong, and having the family members stare at you and look at you as if you killed their son, their father," and so on.

And he said the only thing that saved him was the fact that he had kept that log book. And, as detailed as he was, that's what saved him in court. And the company ended up getting fined. So I, meticulously from that point, always wrote who was on my crew, what they were doing that day, the weather, any changes, and got into the point of starting to write, "The client told us to do this, and meanwhile we don't want to do that."

Simple stuff. But even just footnotes of stuff that you've written it. It teaches you, I find, for me, to remember it. If I write it down, I tend to remember it a little easier. And then it just gives you notes to go back on of, one, if there's any claims or an incident or what have you, "Hey, I talked to so-and-so, we had a chat. Talked to the client, and this is what was said."

And the other aspect is, you typically, a lot of times, end up doing a lot of similar or the same projects five, 10 years down the road. So you can go back to that, and it's notes to remind you of things you learned, things you maybe do differently, things you had claims of, and maybe even people that you had working for you that didn't work well with others, or... So yeah, it's become my Bible.

Holly Baril:

So... Yeah. Well, and it's funny because when I'm teaching supervisor training, we talk about the log book, you always get some people in class that are like, "Who has time to fill that book out? I don't have time. I'm busy. If I'm filling the book out, I'm obviously not supervising." And they're just looking for more and more excuses why not to fill out the book.

Andy Fournier:

Yeah.

Holly Baril:

And then, you try and explain to them, "I understand, but you have to. It's like a habit that you need to develop."

Andy Fournier:

Agree.

Holly Baril:

So explain how you've made it so that you're not spending... Because these guys think, "Oh, I got to spend four hours a day in my log book."

Andy Fournier:

No.

Holly Baril:

Come on. No, and again, like you say, if you make it, one, your routine; two, the way you typically write or do stuff so that it's the way you want to do it, I find, obviously, it's easier to do something or to stick to something that you like doing or that it's easy to do.

For me, again, any downtime, my book's always open or right next to me. And it's also notes. I'll leave a square box, and that's my, "I need to do it." It could be safety related. It could be ordering something, or getting back to someone. So as soon as I've got a bit of free time, I scan and go through my book, and, "Oh, yeah, I got to call Charlie back because he still hasn't given me this."

You tailor it like you're tailoring it for your needs. Like you said, you put your box, do that. Well, for somebody else, it could be something different. But yeah, I think you're right. You just have to get into the habit of filling it out. And usually, I tell people in class, "As you do it, you will get better, and you'll know what needs to be in it, what doesn't need to be in it, but you never want to be standing in court trying to explain that you are a good supervisor; you just don't take notes because it probably won't end well." Yeah.

I mean, this question here. I know you have confidence in the construction rules and regulations. Do you feel like you're confident enough to be able to relay that to the workplace and ensure you're following it at all times when the ministry visits?

Andy Fournier:

For our projects, we typically see the Ministry of Labour probably at least once a year, maybe twice a year if we're lucky. And I say "if we're lucky," because I like these third-party audits, if you will, or visits from not only the MOL, but the client, could be even management, on our side, or even Holly or IHSA, yes.

Holly Baril:

Exactly.

Andy Fournier:

It helps you... A lot of times, you get, again, back into the routine, right? This is how we do stuff. And one, maybe there's new legislation out that you didn't realize that has changed. Two, maybe it's something you haven't really worked around for years, and you think you remember.

And that Green Book... I mean, there's quite a bit of information. It can be open to interpretation a little bit. I find it written gray for a reason, to allow you not to handcuff you, but at the same time, that can be challenging, right?

Holly Baril:

Right.

Andy Fournier:

Because if a Ministry of Labour inspector comes, and I find they always go back to, "What do you typically do? What does your day look like?" So, "Do you write in your book to make it look good, or do you actually go out in the field, talk to the guys, practice what you preach?"

And so I feel confident, but always room to learn or improve, if that makes any sense.

Holly Baril:

Yeah, no, 100 per cent. Because you're right, we don't always get aware of the different legislation that's changed or updated, because you're busy.

Andy Fournier:

Yeah.

Holly Baril:

And maybe it came in an email, you looked at it, "I'll read it later," and then you forgot. So definitely, there's always...We're always learning, right?

Andy Fournier:

Yep.

Holly Baril:

So how critical is support of the employer to the success and well-being of a supervisor on a construction site?

Andy Fournier:

I feel that this is where the good companies stick out compared to the ones that need the help. We know a lot of the smaller companies maybe don't have the budgets and so-on to get things done, and back to how realistic is the schedule and the budget.

So if a company keeps going to a client, keeps going to the lowest bid all the time, what do you expect? And we always say, "You can't cut people. You can't cut the equipment. You can't cut the material. So where are you going to cut?"

Holly Baril:

Yep.

Andy Fournier:

It's safety, typically, which sometimes can be people as well, less people, and then everyone's cutting corners to get stuff done to try to make the client or the owner money.

So we did a project years back, and I was asked to leave the company I was working for to go work with the company that was having issues and I declined. And the reason I did is because I said, "Your management and the way you run your organization isn't going to..." It is basically room for disaster.

Holly Baril:

Yeah.

Andy Fournier:

Nobody is supporting anyone. It was exactly what I just talked about. So what we did is I said, "But I have a team with me, and it's going to cost you more, but we'll go as a subcontractor." I've got a team that I've kept and we've worked basically a year and a half with, and filtered through the bad ones, the good ones, and basically the client went for it.

So they spent an extra couple hundred thousand dollars just to have us there as a sub, same people, myself, and so on, and it was super successful. So I know if I had gone there just myself, not having the support... Because the subcontracting at the company I was working for was a big company that was super safety conscious, and didn't care about budgets when it came to safety. They said their motto was...

Even harnesses. I was looking at harnesses the one time, and it was like, I'll buy the two, three hundred dollar harnesses. And they're like, "No, no. Get the best harnesses, the ones that the guys want to wear." I'm like, "Really? I'm not really used to that." And they're like, "Yeah, get the harnesses so that the guys wear them, they're comfortable." And it's like, "Okay." But you want to talk safety culture. Put the money where it belongs, and obviously the success follows, right?

Holly Baril:

So some of those good traits then of those supportive employers are exactly that, right? So that safety's a priority, not just a budget and schedules.

Andy Fournier:

Yeah.

Holly Baril:

They care about their workers. Anything else about it?

Andy Fournier:

No. It's tough because I get the other aspect of it from a client standpoint. The client that we deal with has operations all over the world, and they said it's expensive to do business in Canada.

Holly Baril:

Oh.

Andy Fournier:

So when you compare it to other countries and stuff where people aren't getting paid as much and so on, they can get away with...sometimes legislation's not the same, rules are different, and they're not paying people what they pay us here. So I feel like they're also challenged with, "Okay, budget. We only have so much to spend this year, but we want to get all these things done. Okay, so pick maybe one or two instead of trying to do five, and do it right," you know?

Holly Baril:

Mm-hmm.

Andy Fournier:

But it's easier said than done, because there's that whole...Many aspects to that, for construction and obviously successful project and finding the right bidder.

Holly Baril:

Okay. So what advice would you give to a construction worker who wishes to take on the additional responsibilities of becoming a supervisor?

Andy Fournier:

For me, I've always said, "Do you want to be a supervisor because you want to tell everybody you're the boss, or are you doing it because you want that position to work with people, again, try to succeed in the challenges and stuff that come with it?" Yes, the financial side of it of maybe making an extra couple bucks or a few bucks more is enticing, but also know your responsibilities.

I had a supervisor one time, we did a meeting, and it's a supervisor's meeting that we'd have every day, and he says, "What do you mean I can get charged double for my guys not following the rules?" And we said, "Well, you're the supervisor." And he's like, "Yeah, but it's not worth two bucks an hour for me to

go to prison." And he was very apprehensive to be a supervisor. So it's like, "Well, why'd you take the job?" "Well, I was offered to be the boss, and I wanted to be the boss." It's like, "Okay. Well…"

Holly Baril:

Yeah. And I want two bucks more an hour.

Andy Fournier:

Yeah, exactly, right? So not understanding the responsibilities that come with it, right?

Holly Baril:

And the fines, and all that stuff, they don't understand that, right? So…

Andy Fournier:

Yeah.

Holly Baril:

...Although supervisor training is not mandatory, it is 100 per cent something that every supervisor should do, so that they understand their legal responsibilities that come with the job.

Andy Fournier:

Holly, I've seen a lot of people I've worked with that never did log books, and I wouldn't say all of them have taken them on, but when we have these types of conversations we just had now, when they realize what's at stake, you start seeing people, in their own ways, do their own log books. And those progress too, right? When I started, they were a little different, and they've progressed to what they are now, as you learn.

Holly Baril:

For sure. Okay, awesome. Well, you know what? Thank you very much. That was great conversation. I think you provided a lot of good information for our listeners out there. So with that, again, thank you very much for doing this.

Andy Fournier:

Thanks for having me.

Holly Baril:

Okay, you're welcome. Thank you for listening to our podcast. I'm your host, Holly Baril, 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. And remember, your health, your safety, your future, protect all three.

Announcer

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