

## Why OSHA Standards Shouldn't Be The High-water Mark For Contractor Safety

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Every January, construction companies across the country reset their calendars, their budgets, and their goals. New projects break ground. New crews come on board. New schedules promise efficiency, speed, and growth.

Yet safety rarely gets the same fresh approach.

In my work investigating catastrophic construction injuries, I repeatedly hear the same defense after a worker is seriously hurt or killed: The site was Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) compliant. Inspections passed. The boxes were checked. The paperwork was in order.

That logic is not just flawed. It is dangerous.

Occupational Safety and Health Administration standards were never designed to represent the highest level of safety achievable on a jobsite. They were designed to establish a baseline. A floor. The minimum conditions within which work can legally proceed. Treating those standards as a finish line misunderstands their purpose and puts lives at risk.

Compliance does not equal protection. OSHA cannot anticipate every site-specific hazard, every shortcut taken under deadline pressure, or every cascading failure that begins with a small oversight and ends with a life-altering injury. Construction sites are dynamic environments. They change daily, sometimes hourly. Real safety requires constant reassessment, not static adherence to minimum rules.

The most serious cases I see do not stem from blatant disregard for safety. They come from a far more subtle and



common problem: the assumption that if a site meets OSHA requirements, it must be safe enough. That assumption allows risk to hide in plain sight. It allows known dangers to be tolerated because they fall just outside a regulatory violation. It allows companies to confuse legality with responsibility.

The start of a new year is the right time to confront that thinking.


The beginning of a year can offer something construction rarely has time for during the rest of the year: a pause. A moment before momentum takes over. It is a great opportunity to ask hard questions about whether safety programs are proactive or merely “compliant,” whether training is meaningful or performative, and whether risk is being managed or simply documented.

True safety cultures do not ask, “What does OSHA require?” and stop there. They ask, “What could go wrong here?” They look beyond checklists and consider how real people interact with real equipment under real pressures. They invest in planning, oversight, and accountability that exceed the bare minimum because they understand the stakes.

Workers do not measure safety in citations avoided or inspections passed. They measure it in whether they go home at the end of the day. Their families measure it in whether they hear footsteps at the door that night.

OSHA compliance matters. It is essential. But it was never meant to be the ceiling. When we are pursuing litigation due to an injury, we are not simply looking to see if an OSHA citation was issued, we are evaluating how an accident could have been prevented. Contractors need to set safety above the floor and ensure their projects are safe for everyone.

As companies set their priorities for the year ahead, the most important resolution they can make is to not only meet OSHA minimum standards, but to exceed them. Nobody wants to get operated on by a surgeon who had the lowest possible passing score on their boards and nobody should want to work at a construction site that meets the bare minimum standards for safety.

Let's start 2026 on the right foot safetywise. Instead of just setting the bare minimum for safety on jobsites, let's think about what we can all do to make sure workers return home at night. 



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