Rethinking The Approach To Suicide Prevention In Construction: What Gets Passed Down From Leadership

Written by: Colleen Saringer, Ph.D., Founder, Dr. Colleen Saringer Speaks

Construction has always passed things down. An experienced worker shows an apprentice how to do a task. A superintendent teaches another how to keep a project moving. Safety lessons learned the hard way are now shared at pre-shift meetings. Pride.

But construction has historically passed down other ways of working, too: Don't complain, everyone is tired; Being screamed at is a part of learning; Personal problems stay at home; The best workers never say no; Respect has to be earned; Getting treated poorly is just "how construction is."

These ways of working aren't found in an employee handbook. They're taught through what leaders model, workplaces reward, and what workers learn must be tolerated to succeed and/or simply make it through the day.

But over time, the apprentice becomes the foreman, the foreman becomes the superintendent, and the superintendent becomes the owner. And just like that, the new leader is passing down — even if unintentionally — how they learned to work.

This matters because regardless of intent, what gets passed down shapes the workplace people experience every day. And it can affect culture, mental health and, in some cases, suicide risk.

With more than 5,000 people from the U.S. construction industry dying by suicide in 2023, this inheritance deserves attention.



CONSTRUCTING THE PATH TO SUICIDE PREVENTION

In August 2026, the Constructing the Path to Suicide Prevention Act was introduced in the U.S. Senate. If passed, the legislation would authorize a national study through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to better understand the suicide risk factors facing construction workers and inform future prevention efforts.

This is an important step. More construction-specific research is needed.

But the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health already recognizes that poorly organized work and unmanaged

workplace risks can contribute to suicide risk, while a broader body of research has linked workplace conditions such as high job demands, low job control, isolation, bullying, and incivility to anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, and suicide.

Which means construction doesn't need to wait for an act to pass before asking: "What's happening at the site, in the job trailer, or office that's adding unnecessary mental weight to an already demanding job?" And then to act on the answer.

Make no mistake, it's not being implied that construction is inherently harmful, nor is it being suggested that construction work is the cause of suicide. Suicide is complex and involves multiple interacting factors. But complexity doesn't remove work/the workplace from the equation. And if specific conditions contribute to suicide risk, employers have an opportunity — and responsibility — to address what's in their control.

Construction will always have deadlines, physically difficult work, weather, out of town projects, and financial pressures. But humiliation isn't a job requirement. Bullying isn't necessary to meet a deadline. Being treated poorly doesn't have to be a rite of passage because the person now running the job once endured it.

This is where owners, executives, and leaders have an opportunity: Distinguish what pressures are inherent to construction, identify which have simply been inherited, and decide what gets passed down next.

These decisions won't only affect the people doing the work. They'll affect safety, accountability, retention, and business performance.

THE BUCK STOPS HERE

Scott Satory, owner of an Atlanta-based commercial roofing company, made these distinctions and decisions long before workplace mental health or suicide prevention became part of his leadership vocabulary.

Before becoming a business owner, Satory worked in project management and sales for a general contractor and roofing manufacturer. Despite routinely putting in long hours, exceeding his sales goals, and providing exemplary customer service, his bosses called him stupid, lazy, and lucky. A native of Cleveland, Ohio, he was also told that "a Yankee wouldn't be able to sell in rural Georgia." This treatment from leadership put a mental strain on him daily — he always felt as though his job was at risk.

Never forgetting what he endured, and how it made him feel, Satory knew exactly what he would not tolerate or pass down to his employees when opening his business in 2008. Instead, he would treat employees the way he had wanted to be treated: with respect. He expected them to treat each other the same way.

CHANGING WHAT GETS PASSED DOWN DOESN'T LOWER THE BAR

Satory's decision didn't lower working expectations or eliminate accountability.

In fact, when his best foremen made three mistakes on a project — the last causing roof leaks that severely damaged the customer's product — Satory didn't berate him in front of the crew. Instead, he pulled him aside, asked if all was okay, explained the consequences of the mistakes, and inquired if additional support was needed. He also made it clear: It couldn't happen again.

The foreman did course correct, but not all stories have happy endings; employees have had to be let go. But what Satory has remained committed to passing down is accountability, not disrespect.

This distinction matters because the way leaders protect people and the way they protect the business aren't necessarily two different decisions.

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE: EXAMINE WHAT'S BEEN INHERITED

If workplace conditions can contribute to mental health and suicide risk, then examining the conditions within an employer's control is part of suicide prevention.

The goal in removing what's inherent in construction is about making the work easy — though it will never be, given the work is hard, physically and mentally. Instead, the goal is to stop making an already demanding job unnecessarily harder.

To do this, we must be willing to examine the ways of working

that continue to be carried forward and question whether they still belong. For example:

» **Is it necessary?** Is the pressure inherent to getting the work done safely and successfully, or has it simply become "how it's always been done"?

» **What purpose does it serve?** Does the practice actually improve safety, accountability, or performance? Or is it being preserved because those before learned to tolerate it?

» **What is it costing?** Is it contributing to exhaustion, mistakes, injuries, isolation, turnover, fear, or silence?

» **Is it worth passing down?** Would the practice still be considered good leadership if tradition weren't the reason for keeping it?

It's impossible to remove every pressure that comes with and/or from work. But not every inherited way of working needs to remain, either. Reducing unnecessary exposure to the workplace conditions that can contribute to mental health and suicide risk gives construction leaders another place to act on prevention — before a worker reaches a point of crisis.



About the Author

Dr. Colleen Saringer, founder of Dr. Colleen Saringer Speaks. As a former organizational health leader, now professional speaker, she taps into her 40-plus years of experience inside two family-owned construction businesses to bring rare insights into how kindness, boundaries, and accountability can serve as mental health and suicide prevention "tools."

About the Article

Reprinted from Construction Executive, September, 2026, a publication of Associated Builders and Contractors. Copyright 2026. All rights reserved. Associated Builders and Contractors is a national construction industry trade association representing more than 21,000 members. Based on the merit shop philosophy, ABC helps its members develop people, win work, and deliver work safely, ethically, and profitably for the betterment of the communities in which they work.

Any views and opinions expressed in this article may or may not reflect the views and opinions of the Construction Management Association of America (CMAA). By publishing this piece, CMAA is not expressing endorsement of the individual, the article, or their association, organization, or company.