UPDATE

Highlights

This issue is a follow-up to the article Claude and I wrote last year. In that article we built the argument that good safety, coupled with effective performance based safety training makes good business sense. We highlighted the direct and indirect cost of ineffective safety and provided a framework for success that included six items. The first item in that framework is Commitment.

This article focuses on leadership and its importance on shaping a healthy and effective safety culture. We stress the importance of senior leadership's commitment to safety, not just a superficial endorsement that shifts responsibility down the chain. The interesting part of this argument is that there is a healthy balance between safety, productivity and profits that needs to be driven from the top.

Thanks again to Claude Chapman for his contributions.

Leadership – The Key to a True Safety Culture

by
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In our UPDATE issue entitled "Safety Training – A sure bet that saves lives and money," we address safety and training from the perspective of the cost of not working safely, the behavioral side of safety and finally a framework for success. The first and perhaps the most important item in the framework for success is Commitment. We introduce the notion of management's involvement in organizational safety. The other items within the framework include: performance based training, onsite follow-up, ongoing assessment, feedback and change, and keeping the data. The interesting thing about these other items is they are rather mechanical. They are things that must be done and must be done correctly. Commitment, on the other hand is not mechanical. Commitment is consistent behavior, the understanding of what is right for the organization, and finally, the belief that if it is right, safety, productivity and financial objectives will be achieved. In that context, we are writing this article to address the importance of leadership and the tough task of crafting a culture of safety. Crafting the culture is a major initiative that requires an enormous level of energy and commitment.

Background
Safety historically and traditionally has been one of those necessary evils – companies do it because they have to. I am sure most of our readers can attest to having someone in any particular company they have worked for saying "Safety's the responsibility of the Safety people." And if any of you have any field experience safety becomes important when the safety people come for a visit. So in essence when the safety person is not at a work site, the rules of safety can be bent, or at least not followed as closely as they would be when that person is there. Now, let's think about this in a different context: how many times do people drive faster than the speed limit? They think *I won't get caught and if I do that is the risk I take.* The same attitude seems to prevail with safety.

We already advanced the position that safety and training not only saves lives but also saves money, and we provided tangible evidence of that. This issue posits another approach to safety – referred to as Behavioral Based Safety. This approach is designed to change behaviors regarding safety – to enlighten

workers as well as teach them to look out for themselves and each other. Behavioral Based Safety is a significant advance in keeping workers safe, but what happens when the managers and leaders don't acknowledge their role in the safety equation? What happens to the behavior of the worker?

This article will address this very important aspect of an integrated safety culture.

Safety's missing link
The traditional way of looking at safety and where safety is falling apart typically involves identifying the missing link. One would follow a trail of accidents to the person or persons who did not adhere to prescribed safety procedures for the work they were doing. While this may appear to be the solution in most cases, the fact that a person or persons decided to violate safety procedures goes much deeper than this simple characterization or the person who violated the rules. Why did they violate the rules? Their behavior for sure; but who directed their behavior?

Let's look at a very typical example:
A company starts to experience safety issues. People start getting hurt on the job. At first these injuries are attributed to the obvious missing links. The presumed culprit is identified and corrective actions taken. Issue closed – right? Well, when the next and more serious injury occurs, management says that it is time for them to get involved. This involvement typically results in more activity, meaning more safety meetings, more posters and the expected safety communication from above. The president of the company feels that he must get involved so he starts promoting safety. These are all overt and obvious demonstrations of force. Now as the story continues, what tends to happen is once the banner is up for safety the real business of running the company must be dealt with. So when it comes to making the decisions to back up a safety issue, memories become short. The company line is safety, but the reality is there is a tendency to drive over the speed limit – company policy is willing

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to accept a higher level of risk related to safety. The leadership has established a level of what we refer to as prudent risk. This level of risk is a default direction to employees to stretch/violate rules without even making a specific statement to that effect. Employees therefore believe that the company can accept a level of risk that may really not be in the best interest of their workers. Not to say this is done in any calculated fashion, rather it is part of the 'culture.' The most prevalent competitors of safety are productivity and associated profit. If a company's culture values productivity and profit more than safety, then the assumed prudent risk regarding safety is higher than most safety professionals would like to see. Productivity may increase with a higher risk appetite (meaning that the rules can be bent or violated), but if and when one person gets hurt, profits dwindle because margins are quite close in the construction industry. Interestingly management doesn't see this correlation until very serious accidents occur. Convincing management of the relationship between safety (lowering the risk profile) and profit has traditionally been a challenge because of the over reaching focus on productivity. The reality is; the cost of accidents can be so significant in both direct and indirect measures that managers are strangulating profits.

Example: OSHA declares that fire resistant clothing is required when workers can be exposed to fires. Expanding on the prudent risk model, a manager believes that the exposure to fire situations is low. The Company has been working this type of work for years and even when it did experience fires, they were minor and no one was hurt, therefore it elects to not purchase fire retardant clothing. This is just another cost item that affects the profit numbers, and this is a tough month so it will forgo the expense. Nothing is purchased nor is anything pursued with the employees and more importantly no message or communication indicating a common sense safety commitment to a requirement is made – But people are watching! What message is management sending to their employees? It sure as heck isn't SAFETY is Number One! The attitude conveyed by a singular decision to not purchase necessary protective equipment establishes a culture; a culture that extends to more serious behavioral issues such as the reluctance to shut a job down when it is unsafe or could cause a serious accident? The culture becomes one where employees will do what they think

the boss wants rather than what they believe is the right thing to do.

Risk position and messages to the organization

When a company assumes a risk position that ignores, or worse yet justifies their behavior for ignoring requirements from safety organizations such as OSHA, MSHA (Mine Safety and Health Act) or state requirements, what message does this send, what are employees to believe? Back to prudent risk, when the level of prudence is low but the company 'gets away with it' (i.e. no injuries), the profit needs are met. The problem there is one of a dodged bullet. It is one time evasion only to go back to the low level of prudence and the potential for another bullet that may not miss. Herein lies the real problem – the bullet that can not be dodged. Along with prudent risk is another aspect – consequence. Once you have established this type of behavior it will repeat itself until someone gets hurt. Back to the speeding analogy, when we speed we accept a level of risk, but we also (at least many of us) know the consequences. We balance the risk and consequence. Consequences can include the obvious one – a ticket from the police, but what about the consequence of injury or even death caused by speeding? In construction the same consequence exists, a company may be fined and typically that is not a major issue, but a serious injury or fatality has dramatic consequences.

Organizational culture

Now we want to bring you to the cultural argument. Based on the above discussion we have characterized a culture. A culture that tolerates a level of risk and even worse creates the environment for people in the field to interpret their own level of risk. This is very dangerous since risk appetites are extremely variable. There exists the potential that when the competitors of safety (productivity and profit) become stressed, the level of prudence goes down further and consequences increase significantly. The message to the organization becomes quite clear – even though we say SAFETY is Number One. Do those in the field doing the work as well as the supervision that is responsible for productivity and profit, really believe that message, or is it management rhetoric?

As we talk about a culture and changing a culture, how does one find the MISSING LINK? How does a supervisor or manager realize that they may be only one or two accidents away from not making a profit for the whole year? How do they make sure that their employees understand the value they add to the success of the organization, and management's commitment to them? We offer some insights to these questions.

- Safety requires constant involvement and total commitment from local management and corporate leadership. This is much more than posters and flag waving – it is behaving as though safety is more than a priority, it is the way a company functions. It is part of the fabric and culture of the company. It is not easy but well worth the effort.
- An example of non-committed management is when some rules are enforced for some people and not for the SPECIAL employees. Needless to say SPECIAL means different things to different people. Talk about bad examples! Where is the MISSING LINK in this example?
- When looking at the cost of complying with safety (i.e. by not purchasing safety equipment, etc.) what message is being sent to employees? NOTE: we are not suggesting an open checkbook and irresponsible spending, but we are suggesting that the leadership and local management demonstrate a consistent commitment and behavior toward meeting the safety needs of their people.
- If leaders and/or managers allow their on-site supervisors to shortcut safety rules those leaders and managers are committing safety suicide! Is this the MISSING LINK?
- What is the company's investment in safety? Is work stopped when another safety person is needed on one of the jobs to ensure the work can be completed safely?
- Are the company's safety people good examples to the workforce? Are they well-trained and sincere in their safety examples? Do the workers value their contributions or resent their presence at a work site? This is an overall cultural issue and if safety people are professional and well-trained, and the workers know that they are there to help them work safely, then a healthy safety culture is being realized. NOTE: this means that the Safety Department and corporate leadership are in complete agreement on the concepts and implementation of a safety culture and behavioral safety program.

Conclusion

There is a level of commitment required to make sure that foremen, who are the best advocate for production as well as safety, fulfill corporate expectations. Tolerance for safety shortcuts and excuses for a less than complete commitment to working safely are not

part of a healthy safety culture. Create the culture, get the right people on board – including the leadership and managers, and the ingredients for a healthy safety culture exist. Then the hard work begins, but the return on this investment is extremely valuable.

With that said, we must point out that most companies that realize the value of safety and the productivity and profit that follows may not the best judges of what to change. Building a safety centered culture involves more than a cursory look at safety. Changing culture takes time and leadership. For example, the current most productive supervisor may not exemplify the desired safety culture, and in the construction industry, this supervisor may turn out to be management's worst nightmare when it comes to building a safety culture.

It important that an impartial and independent professional take a look at your culture and help build a safety behavior based culture in a manor that will get gain employee support and get the right people on board? Looking from within typically results in what we call the silo effect with the consequence of barrier building. Changing culture involves breaking down barriers that block any movement toward the final goal of a safe productive culture embraced by company leadership as well as each supervisor and employee. Do you track and more importantly understand the near misses and accidents that occur?   Do you and your employees understand the simple concept of indirect costs? How is an injured person treated? Do you treat them all the same?   There a lot of questions of how to build a good safety program; we can share our knowledge and experience to make the transition to a safety centered culture as efficient and effective as possible. For more on this please call us.