

THE THINKER

He says safety pros are in a comfort zone.

Larry Hansen, a Safety Excellence and Organizational Performance consultant, is one of the people stretching the envelope of safety management thought. He answered questions put to him by Industrial Safety & Hygiene News.

What's the basis for the article you wrote titled, "A Call for (R)evolution," which appeared in the March "Professional Safety Journal?"

In June of 1993 I celebrated my 25th anniversary in the loss control profession. As I pondered my career, I realized that not all that much has changed. The battles are different but there's not much progress. The realities are:

1) The long-term trend in workplace injury rates hasn't improved substantially over the last 20 years, and some of the studies suggest that the numbers we're looking at are really worse than we suspect due to under reporting.

2) NIOSH studies in the '70s and '80s comparing companies with good loss experience versus those with poor loss experience found "no significant differences" in accident results based on "traditional" safety programs.

These studies found that companies relying heavily on safety directors and safety committees actually produce worse results. Companies that rely more on staff administration end up usurping line management responsibility. Those who can control accident exposures abdicate responsibility to those who can't (the safety director).

As consultant Paul Coderre says, "Safety and business have traditionally been mutually exclusive. Continuing this separation in today's economic climate will be fatal."

My desire is to make a "positive difference" by bringing some of these cri-

tical issues to light and causing American industry to re-evaluate its approaches and values.

What's the most important message you're trying to get across?

The message is easy. Getting organizations to accept it is the hard part. To paraphrase President Clinton, "It's MANAGEMENT stupid!"

One reason industrial safety has had limited success is the perception that safety is "technical" - not a managerial/organizational issue. But the bottom line is this: Like quality defects, excess costs, and high scrap, employee injuries (human scrap) are just another outcome of poorly designed management processes.

Management types don't generally like to hear this message, but I believe it's the truth. Those who eventually accept it and make serious efforts to change their organizational philosophies, methodologies, and processes reap huge rewards. In well-managed companies, safety isn't a program, it's how things are done routinely and continuously.

You say safety leaders are needed to help bring about this change. Where are they?

The vast majority of safety practitioners in industry today can be put in one of two categories: 1) Those who haven't got a clue!; and 2) Those who haven't got a chance!

This profession has been populated many years by folks who have been schooled with a real focus on technical safety. At this point they are comfortable, unwilling to take risks, suspect of new ideas, and not learning.

The second group, those who haven't got a chance, are actually enlightened individuals. They're newer to the business and recognize the need for change. Unfortunately, these people are trapped in organizations that don't recognize or believe safety is a management

function, not simply a matter of compliance or technical efforts.

There is a third category. Those safety practitioners who are succeeding by applying organizational and management approaches to their safety challenge. Unfortunately, these are a minority.

Your recommendations for improvement include employee empowerment. Specifically what type of empowerment is needed?

It's important to keep in mind that before an organization can pursue "empowerment" it must first create "enablement." Employees must be knowledgeable and capable of doing the job. Unfortunately, United States industry does not effectively develop an employee's ability to think.

Once employees are enabled, they can then be empowered. That is, provided with authority to take independent actions in problem solving and process improvement. This requires "trust" on the part of management-something that is not frequently given in organizations. For empowerment to work, values have to replace rules. Rewards for risk-taking have to replace fears of failure.

One of the most successful ways to fuel empowerment is through gain sharing-linking financial rewards to successful efforts. Unfortunately, my experience finds that reward systems are really screwed up in most workplaces. Far too often, only executives reap the rewards (bonuses and perks) for innovations and productivity increases driven by the first line.

I also see where employees suffer and/or are called upon to pay the price (called "right sizing, down sizing, out-placing") caused by short-sided "QTQ" (quarter-to-quarter) management practices that wreck organizations.

I find that employee relations policies today put too much emphasis on "measuring" people rather than "valuing" them. These policies are reflected in a number of our outcomes including our injury and illness rates.

What's your basis for saying "employees fail due to management?"

My reason for believing this is based on the works of W. Edwards Deming and Tom Peters.

I happen to believe in Deming's common cause and special cause theory which equates 90 percent of our system outcomes (including accidents) to common causes, those causes imbedded in the systems designed by management. Only 10 percent of outcomes are due to special causes of individual behaviors.

Tom Peters, in turn, speaks of "management enlightenment" as "a blinding flash of the obvious." In safety, this phenomenon exists in the linkage of accident causes with their true organizational sources. Most executives would readily agree that "management" has the responsibility for: design of products, selection of employees, specification of materials, development of policies, drafting of procedures, specifying machinery, planning work schedules, controlling work environment, and shaping organizational culture by all of these.

But when accidents occur from exactly these same factors, "the blinding flash of the obvious" is: "Damn those *careless employees* that keep having accidents!"

I don't buy that. I believe that causes of accidents in the workplace are embedded in the management process, not in employee behaviors. It's a "control issue" and management controls all the loss-producing sources.

As Pierre Morriseau says, "A company is a system which can be broken into three components-physical (machinery), human (employees), and social organization (management). We have spent the last 80 plus years trying to fix the equipment and people while ignoring the social part of the system."

What skills do safety professionals need to develop to gain management respect?

To accomplish this, safety professionals must develop skills in management, organization, and corporate finances. This will enable them to equate their

activities and their results to the important "P&L statement" that guides corporate decision making.

Aside from efforts by the safety professional, what needs to happen to make safety integral to business cultures?

First, there's a dire need to improve our nation's business school curriculum by involving loss management studies in MBA programs. We need to develop a future generation of American business leaders who understand and are sensitive to the needs and opportunities to improve the bottom line by effectively managing safety in the workplace.

This process is underway-the Minerva Education Institute (domiciled at Xavier University in Cincinnati), funded by NIOSH and private industry, is addressing this challenge. If America believes as I do that the workplace injury crisis will be resolved only through education, not legislation, then it can expedite this process by funding the Minerva Institute.

The second critical change that has to occur is restructuring business reward systems. Today management is rewarded almost solely for production. There's a need to stress safety performance and to build rewards and punitive criteria into safety performance criteria. Until this happens, little will change.

What makes your message timely in 1993?

Nothing really. I received a phone call from a recently retired safety director for a large southwest metal foundry. He told me how his company made a turnaround by employing just the philosophies called for there. When that plan was implemented and ultimately produced huge savings, the general manager said, "We could have done this 20 years ago!" I agree!!!

Larry Hansen is a certified safety professional and holds the Associate of Risk Management designation from the Insurance Institute of America. He is a professional member of the American society of Safety Engineers, and is a past president of the Eastern New York Chapter.

He can be reached at (315) 383-3801 or E-mail – llhsos@dreamscape.com.