

# SPEAKING OUT

## BEYOND COMMITMENT

*By Larry Hansen*

In his recent book, *Future Edge*, Joel Barker, noted futurist, challenges today's manager to "discover the new paradigms of success." His message is clear: the future will belong to those willing to question current ways, abandon existing mindsets, and break the rules that bind us to the past or hold us in the present.

In most businesses, workplace safety is administered under paradigms of the past - paradigms which fail to link accident causation to the management systems that ultimately determine all organizational outcomes. Unlike the quality function, safety has not pursued modern management principles to create a "future orientation."

Tom Peters insightfully identifies the phenomena of a management enlightenment as "...a blinding flash of the ob-vinous!" In safety, this phenomenon exists concerning the linkage of accident causes with their true organizational sources. Most managers would agree that management: designs products, selects and places people, specifies ma-trials, sets policies, develops procedures, acquires machinery, plans schedules, controls the work environ-mint, and shapes the corporate culture.

Yet, despite these clear and accepted management responsibilities, line managers continue to place the cause of workplace accidents on "those careless employees!" This conclusion is wrong! Employees sustain injuries. Accidents occur because of the system and the system is solely the responsibility of management.

Historically, those charged with safety responsibility have cited a lack of management "commitment" as the predominant reason for limited safety success. Being "committed" doesn't cause anything to happen! Most executives are as committed to safety as they are to all other organizationally and

environ-mentally correct issues, many of which receive little or not attention.

Commitment is a passive state and doesn't generate "actions" sufficient enough to change the management values and systems which harbor the true causes of workplace accidents. An illustration by William Hamilton titled, "Do Profits and Social Responsibility Mix," published in the book *Money Should Be Fun*, best describes the current limitations of commitment. This illustration depicts a cocktail party and a hardened senior executive responding to an in-query from a young female business associate. The caption reads: "Committed to safety? Sure I'm committed to safety. I'm committed to safety and any other damn thing that will sell cars!"

As this illustration clearly expresses, commitment is not enough. What is needed from corporate executives is profound knowledge - an understanding of what's right - and proactive involvement - a willingness to act on what's wrong. These are the true keys to management effectiveness, and that includes safety effectiveness!

An effective safety program needs leadership, which is a quantum leap beyond commitment. Only leadership can successfully guide a corporation through a safety paradigm shift to a desired future state: a safe workplace.

Safety leadership (actually a lack of it) can be found in many organizations. If one hears:

- "If only the union would..."
- "If only supervisors would..."
- "If only the government would..."
- "If only corporate would..."
- "If only our employees would..."
- "If only, if only, if only,..."

...It's a pretty good bet that effective leadership is lacking.

Leadership is a power of influence created by values and actions. Leaders refuse to assign personal (or organizational) failures, including accidents, to situations or conditions beyond their direct control (i.e., unions, regulators, lawyers, etc.). Effective leaders have an "internal locus of

control." They fully believe that they have the knowledge, skill, and ability to influence the ultimate outcome of their efforts and if their results are not what they desire, they know where to look for the causes and answers.

Harold Geneen, past CEO of International Telephone & Telegraph, describes the critical relationship between "leader-ship" and "safety" in his assessment: "Having an effective safety pro-gram is no different than having a good tennis serve...It's the follow-through that counts!"

If employees don't know what to do; don't know how to do it; have to contend with obstacles beyond their control; are incapable of doing it but are put there anyway; don't have enough time; don't have the proper equipment; are provided with inadequate tools; think they are doing it right yet get no feedback; and are allowed to continue all of the above, then safety programs fail.

Employees in these same companies fail for one simple reason. Anyone care to venture a guess? (Hint: Ten letters; starts with "L").

Successful safety efforts require executives who are willing to go beyond "commitment" to participatory leadership. Success belongs to those who are willing to say: "Hold all my calls, I'm in a safety meeting!" (Anthony Skiff, "Safety Works So Why Don't We Use It," *Safe Workplace Magazine*, January 1993).

That's *involvement*; that's *leadership*; and that would be revolutionary! **OH**

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