

DEBUNKING SAFETY MYTHS

"True accident causes lie in corporate offices and planning rooms."

LARRY HANSEN, CSP, ARM

It's time to change the lackluster results produced by traditional safety wisdom. To do so, we need to separate myth from reality, and create a new set of core beliefs—a new safety paradigm. Here's what I mean:

Myth: Accidents drive workers' compensation costs!

Reality: Claims drive workers' compensation costs!

People frequently confuse accidents with claims—they're not, in fact, one in the same... one costs a lot of money!

It's necessary for all businesses to have a "claim deterrent process," a strategy which goes far beyond accidents or injuries and deals with their ultimate outcome: claims. Claims (the dollar value of accidents) are to a large extent subjective; a matter of employee perception and attitude. Employees' decisions to file claims, lose time, the amount of time lost, their willingness to return and the ultimate degree of residual disability they sustain are all choices employees make based on their perception of the organization and its management values.

Human resource practices offer great opportunities to shape attitudes and slash workers' compensation "claims." When we fail to build positive employee relationships, we just fuel the "claim development process."

Myth: Traditional safety programs are valid, well founded—they work!

Reality: Traditional safety programs are often based on shallow management support.

Professor Anthony Veltri of Oregon State University conducted a survey to determine the safety strategies most frequently employed in our nation's workplaces. The results clearly

identify the predominant strategy (77 percent) to be "reluctant compliance"—the safety department's job is to shield the line organization from the regulators and to assure statutory compliance.

Alfie Koln, in speaking to industry's focus on quality results via compliance says, "If temporary compliance is the goal of managers, then we just explained the problem with American industry. Temporary is obviously inadequate. As for compliance, quality never comes from mindless obedience." Neither will safety!

Myth: Management "commitment" is the key to safety success.

Reality: Management "action" is the sole requisite for safety success.

Talk is cheap; most safety programs are a lot of talk—aka-lip service!

"Commitment" is a passive state of acceptance and can never direct the complex interactions required to improve an organization's safety performance. Only active involvement can overcome the corporate inertia which impedes and organization from attaining higher levels of safe performance. Commitment without action only produces "cynicism." "They watch your feet not your lips," says Tom Peters.

Myth: Poor employee attitudes are the cause of the workers' compensation problem.

Reality: Poor management practices cause all employee attitudes.

All business issues usually get reduced to but two acid tests: "Cost benefit ratios" and "make or buy decisions." Without a doubt, employee attitudes are a "make" decision by managers. Managers don't intentionally hire "bad attitudes"... they're smarter than that. But, that leaves only one other conclusion: if bad attitudes prevail in the

workplace, then they're highly efficient at "making them."

Bad attitudes are an issue, but they're not the problem. The problem is their cause, the reasons they exist, and more specifically, the practices which create them.

Hal Rosenbluth, co-author of "The Customer Comes Second," believes that: "Business earns the bad attitudes of its employees." And, J. Michael Crouch, TQM author, says: "Employee attitudes are important, but the fact is they are irrelevant until management attitudes are addressed."

Michael Shor, president of Health Care Fist, Inc., is totally correct: "The best loss control program is the world can never make up for lousy employee relations."

Myth: Unsafe employee acts are responsible for 85 percent of all workplace accidents—employees are the problem.

Reality: The process, designed and administered by management, is responsible for 94 percent of all outcomes (including accidents)—management makes most of the mistakes!

Tom Peters speaks of "a blinding flash of the obvious," a phenomena in which obvious facts just don't lead to obvious conclusions. In safety, there's most definitely "blinding flash of the obvious" mentality.

When managers are asked "Who's responsible for the production process - planning, organizing, staffing, developing specifications, planning work process, specifying materials, establishing rules, designing layouts, etc.—there's usually no debate that these are management responsibilities.

However, when employees are injured from this process, management's typical reaction is: "Careless employees!" Employees sustain injuries... accidents result from the process designed, developed and operated by management.

Myth: Compliance to safety rules assures safe performance—obedience is required.

Reality: Rules can never adequately address the hazard variables inherent in a dynamic organization.

"Thinking" is critical!

Obedience and thinking are at opposite ends of the business spectrum, directly aligned with failure and success. Progressive companies recognize that success is not achieved via rules—employees will follow rules no matter how stupid they are!

In the past, business was run under the premise that managers did the thinking and employees did the "doing," no thinking allowed! The new philosophies now call for empowerment, participation and employee involvement. However, this is frequently a ploy. Managers tell employees they want them to participate, give opinions and take part—"to think"—yet when they do and tell managers what's really wrong (mostly with them and their systems), they are ignored, chastised, labeled as "not team players"... or downsized! America's work-places do need to be "reengineered," but what is really needed is more employee "head room."

Myth: Supervisory accident investigations reveal critical facts which prevent accidents from recurring.

Reality: Supervisory accident investigations rarely identify real accident causes embedded deep in the organization. Recurrence is inevitable.

If we are to believe the findings in accident investigation reports, then the following are the real sources of accidents: 1) Careless employees—40 percent; 2) Beats me—dunno! (blank space on report)—25 percent; 3) All other causes—35 percent.

Obviously, such conclusions are open to question—but they seldom are! If accident investigations aren't identifying system failures, they're not producing

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accurate information. Most aren't!

True accident causes rarely lie on the production floor ... symptoms do. True accident causes lie in corporate offices and planning rooms, places not generally frequented by safety directors. Managers need to cease reliance on inspecting hazards out of the process and dedicate more effort to designing safety in.

Myth: Safety incentive programs are quick, easy and inexpensive ways to drive safety improvement.

Reality: Safety incentive programs are quick, easy and inexpensive!

Alfie Koln, author of "Rewards as Punishment," identifies key reasons why incentive programs have minimal impact on long-term accident costs:

- First, they're only incentive programs, they don't obligate any change in existing processes or practices;
- Second, incentives ignore reasons, they frequently disguise the real deficiencies and strategic flaws in the organization; and
- Third, they're premised on "wrong headed" assumptions that accidents are intentional employee acts and that a baseball cap, belt buckle, or \$25 savings bond (current value \$18.75) will cause them to stop throwing limbs into unguarded machines or falling off of scaffolds.

Myths: To improve safety, an organization must make a significant commitment to employee training.

Reality: To improve safety, an organization must make a significant commitment to fix whatever it is that's really wrong-generally not the employee!

The real sources of accidents are deficient planning, poor organization, unclear goals, lack of vision, vague responsibilities, autocratic direction, lack of vision, vague responsibilities, autocratic direction, lack of employee involvement, conflicting priorities, poor communications

and incompetent supervision to name but a few.

When these factors interact and culminate in accidents, management's most frequent response is "we need a training program" -an emphasis on "people at fault" rather than "process at fault."

The truth as identified by the late W. Edwards Deming is that management is responsible for most all outcomes of the production system including its volume of human scrap. It's the process that needs fixing 94 percent of the time ... not the people.

Myth: Safety is an employee benefit issue most effectively handled by committees.

Reality: Safety is a boardroom issue which can only be positively affected by that group.

Workers' compensation costs have escalated in most industries to be truly a boardroom issue. And yet, how do corporations typically deal with such problems? They create staff/employee committees which lack direction, have limited funding, and which lack the authority to truly impact real organizational causes. The result: meetings every Tuesday of the month whether they're needed or not!

Positive results just can't be produced by "safety committees," but they can always be produced by a "Board of Directors" once they put their minds to it ... and they usually only have to meet quarterly!

*Larry Hansen, CSP, is an Organizational Performance and Safety Excellence Leadership consultant. He can be reached in Syracuse, New York by phone: (315)383-3801, or
E-mail:
llhsos@dreamscape.com*

Reprint from Industrial Safety & Hygiene News, October 1994, Vol. 28, No. 10, Chilton Company, Chilton Way, Radnor, PA 19089
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