

## **People-Focused Safety**

*The Next Generation in Behavioral Techniques for High Hazard Industries*

By Lee Marchessault, CUSA, CUSP  
Incident Prevention Magazine February 2010

Workplace safety is not an exact science. We can determine hazards, measure risks, provide protective equipment, implement policies and procedures-- and then inject corrective actions when needed-- but may still fall short of stellar performance.

An uncontrollable variable that hinders our best efforts are the work practices of employees. Everyone acts and reacts differently to situations we face each day based on our knowledge, compassion, and personality type and current events in our daily lives. People-focused safety considers traditional behavioral techniques and adds empowerment, making it an effective method to motivate employees and improve safety programs, especially in high hazard industries.

For more than 50 years, safety professionals have used traditional safe methods to implement and enforce rules established through industry standards or hazard analysis, and then investigate incidents to determine root causes. Lagging indicators such as OSHA incident/severity and insurance modification rates were the primary measures used for program effectiveness. This was better than the days where high fatality rates were expected and perceived as an acceptable loss for high hazard industries such as utilities.

About 20 years ago, the new concept of behavior-based safety was introduced, enhancing the effectiveness of many safety programs. An important aspect of this model was to understand what drives our employees to work safely. The methodology required a study of human behavior, which is largely driven by positive immediate consequences as perceived by the individual.

Some success was realized when new positive reinforcers were injected to entice desired behavior. This provided a necessary tool to lower those pesky lagging rates and helped to change the culture of organizations, which formerly viewed safety initiatives as a direct expense.

Today, it's time to advance to a new generation of safety excellence, one where safety is not viewed as an expense but rather a necessary process to benefit all employees and reduce operational costs. People-focused safety is a top down comprehensive approach empowering all employees to be responsible for making critical decisions affecting themselves and their coworkers.

Management initially drives the safety culture of an organization. A people-focused process starts at the top with management education and establishes a protocol to effectively manage and build on the motivation instilled within each employee.

A key component for boosting motivation is active participation. Employees with high participation tend to be more satisfied with their jobs. They have higher self-esteem, low role ambiguity and a positive attitude, which results in lower absenteeism and a better relationship with coworkers and management. Employees derive intrinsic value from active participation enabling them to make a greater contribution to the overall effectiveness of the program.

Employee empowerment is the key component to augmenting safety behavioral techniques. The management team takes on the role of facilitators to guide employees who each act as safety professionals. Knowledge is the cornerstone. All employees receive training on policies and procedures and are given full access to standards and regulations so everyone has an equal understanding of pertinent regulations related to their jobs.

Employees are also given opportunities to actively participate in the process from safety committees to instructing training sessions. Those with supervisor responsibilities give each subordinate the authority to make decisions, including conducting worksite observations (audits), investigating incidents and implementing corrective action (with some limitations). To establish ownership, tasks assigned to individuals are completed without re-assigning anyone in the middle of the project.

Upon completion of the task, a positive consequence—even something as simple as a pat-on-the-back-- is encouraged to foster continued participation in the process. Positive tools may be introduced to improve the safety culture, such as providing the National Safety Council's *Family & Health* magazine to emphasize the importance of family in our safety decisions.

To measure success, avoid using lagging indicators as the sole data source. OSHA incident/severity and insurance modification rates as compared to historical data offer some benefit, but they will only measure failure. If rates are below the industry average, we only failed less than the average company.

A better approach is to use leading indicators to identify program deficiencies before they become a near miss, or worse an injury. Examples of leading indicators include, but are not limited to: employee surveys, percentage of attendance at required safety training, number of near miss reports, workplace observation scores, etc.

Using these indicators, unsafe or at risk behavior can be observed and objectively measured. We can work toward and measure our successes rather than our failures with leading indicators, and ultimately bring down our trailing or lagging indicators in the process.

One of the most effective tools we can implement is regularly conducted worksite observations (a friendlier term than "safety audits"). This not only allows the

organization to take a first hand look at employees demonstrating their abilities, but also sends a message that they care about the employee's well being. Crew leaders or foremen may be asked to conduct these worksite observations as part of a comprehensive empowerment program.

Worksite observations also offer us the ability to ensure that job briefings are effectively assessing hazards and risk levels to ultimately determine work procedures. This is also a good time to document that employees are demonstrating their understanding of safety-related work practices that pertain to their job assignments.

Every organization has an obligation to provide a workplace free from hazards or risk of injury. High hazard industries have a particularly difficult duty to overcome serious risks. The economy may not always allow for a dedicated safety professional so we have to rely on employees to do what is necessary to prevent injuries.

Utilizing people-focused techniques and empowering employees to implement safe work practices, including first hand involvement in the safety process, will significantly reduce the likelihood of incidences and injuries.

***About the Author:*** Lee Marchessault, President of Workplace Safety Solutions, Inc., has been working in the electric utility industry since 1978. Marchessault is an active member and holds several certifications from organizations, including the Electric Division of the NFPA, NSC Utilities Division, NEPPA and ASSE. For questions, please contact him at [lee@workplacesafetysolutions.com](mailto:lee@workplacesafetysolutions.com).