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Proactive Safety

Key to Performance
Improvement



By Jitu C. Patel

Employers must commit to preventing incidents to minimize injury to employees and damage to physical assets. The responsibility for loss prevention begins with the highest level of management and continues down through every level of supervision and eventually to every employee. Identifying and rectifying all associated potential hazards will minimize risks to personnel and property. Certain remedies can help prevent incidents (e.g., regular feedback, employee involvement, recognition and appreciation). A proactive approach creates an environment with a higher awareness of safety and reducing injuries. An employer that institutes a cultural change toward the zero incident concept is bound to see safety improvement.

Safety Management Programs & Disasters

Top-performing companies take every reasonable measure to provide and maintain a safe and healthy work environment for employees and strive to protect the public against foreseeable hazards resulting from their operations. Policy declaration is the first and most important element of

the program. It is important that the highest authority and executive management consider no phase of operation as being of greater importance than that of incident prevention.

Corporate management must ensure that operating and business plans reflect and are align with company loss prevention policy. Executive management directs managers and superintendents to develop and administer an effective loss prevention program.

All employees learn and follow safe work practices; they report all incidents and near-hits, which have lesson learning potential. Identifying and controlling associated potential hazards could minimize the risks to personnel and property. People are the first source of losses; these could be managers, engineers or workers.

The second source is equipment, be it fixed plant, machines, tools or vehicles. The third source is process materials, supplies and products that have physical and chemical hazards. Fourth is surroundings that include buildings, surfaces, lighting, noise, radiation and weather, as well as social or economic conditions that can affect the safe performance of people, equipment and materials.

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To assess these sources effectively, OSH professionals can employ a four-step risk assessment process: 1) identify hazards; 2) evaluate the risk of each exposure; 3) plan how to handle each risk; and 4) manage according to plan.

A Look at Causes

Various conditions and actions can lead to incidents. Examples of unsafe actions include operating equipment without authority, failure to warn, failure to secure, operating at an improper speed or removing a safety device (e.g., Bhopal explosion). Examples of unsafe conditions include inadequate guards; inadequate or improper PPE; defective tools, equipment or materials; restricted movement; inadequate warning systems; fire hazards; poor housekeeping; hazardous gases; vapors, dusts, fumes or oxygen deficient environment; and noise, vibration, radiation, extreme temperatures or inadequate ventilation.

In process industries, incident investigations often reveal causes such as design failure, operational error, equipment failure, and maintenance and inspection deficiencies, inadequate supervision and training, and natural phenomena (e.g., Hurricane Katrina).

Near-Hit Reporting

Industry experience suggests that many near-hits are not reported. With such reports, an organization cannot investigate the causes and, thus, loses the opportunity to prevent an incident. Unsafe situations cause more near-hits and uncorrected unsafe situations cause incidents.

Why don't more people report near-hits? In many cases, the employee has a negative mind-set. Nothing really happened, so why report it? Employees may view the process as a hassle and may fear a negative reaction from their boss. One way to change this mind-set is to ensure that observation cards do not identify individuals and do not lead to penalties or any adverse affect to their safety records. Such a system demonstrates employee and management commitment to safety.

Near-hit reporting and investigating heightens awareness while uncovering problematic conditions and actions that the organization needs to address. One effective way to encourage near-hit reporting is to develop an observation checklist that provides guidelines. However, to be effective, the checklist must be used and completed honestly; otherwise, employees and management may develop a false sense of security.



To increase the integrity of the observation card and the strength of near-hit reporting, the company should institute a no-blame policy statement; this will help gain employee confidence and support. The company should also initiate an employee awareness campaign to encourage and increase active participation; this might include a reward component for those who report near-hits as a motivation. The experiences reported can then be displayed on a bulletin board and website. The company should also provide ongoing training on understanding, reporting and investigating near-hits.

What Motivates Employees?

Hertzberg's work suggests that the leading satisfier for workers is a sense of accomplishment (e.g., I achieved something on my job). Second was recognition for doing a good job (e.g., My boss saw and commented on something I had done). Compensation ranked sixth.

What about the dissatisfiers? For example, employees may say, "I do much more work than Joe, who makes more money than I do. But, when I screw up one time, I get nailed. When I make a mistake, that is recognized 100% of the time, but when I excel, nothing is mentioned 99% of the time." Abuse and favoritism can be a significant problem.

Smartcards are a motivation tool used in some industries. Every month, managers give a customized Smartcard to employees. The company can track and reward managers who participate; participation equates to chances to win trips.

Here's how the cards work. Each supervisor reads the poster of the month and discusses it with employees, then hands them each a Smartcard that contains two true/false questions. The Smartcard matches the poster and it pinpoints the correct behaviors of interest. All employees are helped to answer the true/false questions correctly, and the supervisor encourages them to call their answers into a custom telephone number. Each call is tracked to reward supervisors with trips and prizes based on employees' participation. Can you see how the middle managers are involved?

The Smartcard is customized to the industry situation, preferences and budget. This improves the ability of supervisors and managers to deliver positive reinforcement effectively, thereby creating a better chance of improvement. This sort of proactive approach rewards employees who do things right. In this process, managers decide what behaviors to reward, then do so on a daily basis when those behaviors are observed, without abuse or favoritism.

Be aware, however, that switching from an "entitlement" program to the one that requires action can gener-

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ate resistance. Middle managers will complain they have too much to do to reward employees for safe behavior. Overcome these by rewarding middle managers for driving the behavior-based process. Employees who are willing to put extra effort into safety earn a greater percentage of the rewards available.

Research suggests that incentives work. A study of 300 construction firms found that half of the companies had no safety reward recognition program, while the other 150 companies wanted a safety recognition strategy. At the end of the study, the firms that chose to implement safety recognition programs had injury rates that were 50% lower than the firms that would not try such programs. Numerous case studies report success stories.

Conclusion

OSH professionals must seriously examine traditional thinking about workplace safety. Managers must be active in planning for the safe performance of hazardous tasks. They must ensure that tasks are executed as planned. In addition, management ensures that the workforce is appropriately trained to perform the hazardous jobs and that they are well supervised to ensure full compliance with required procedures. To achieve this managers must be good communicators and set a good leadership example.

The key to success is a sound safety culture that is employee owned, management driven and operationally consistent, and that maximizes creativity and innovation. Its most essential components are management commitment, employee recognition, employee training and hazard analysis with follow ups for correction. Adopt the cultural belief that all incidents are preventable. Any management system will work if top management and employees pull together toward the common vision of zero incidents. OSH professionals must always look for proven methods and strive for continuous improvement of the management system. Any company that institutes a cultural change toward the zero incident concept will likely experience safety improvements about which the entire workforce can be proud. ■

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