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In 1995, the U.S. National Safety Council published a provocative paper entitled “In Safety, Half Truths Hide the Story.” It stated: “Practically every [safety related] incident is the result of inadequate management action, supervisor and worker training, procedures and work conditions and/or safety rules and policy enforcement.” This reflects the common belief that a safe workplace is most likely one in which management has embraced worker safety as the highest priority.

While worker education and policy enforcement is an absolute requirement to realizing a safe workplace, we cannot dissolve individual accountability when it comes to personal safety. This is apparent when, despite all the safety messages, procedures, meetings, checks, specialized equipment, training, permits, measures and good intent, we still hear about maintenance professionals getting hurt on the job.

A parallel prime non-workplace example can be found with the automobile. Here, the manufacturer has been both legislated and proactive in providing the user with what is arguably the safest environment in the world.

Today’s vehicles are emblazoned with colorcoded safety messages, safety glass, seat belts, front and side air bags, body roll protection, energy-absorbing crumple zones, climate control, traction control, ABS braking systems, warning systems, etc. Yet, we still see an alarming amount of injury and death on the roadways.

Conjectured opinion has placed blame for most automobile accidents on human error caused by distraction. Driver distraction takes many forms, including eating and drinking, primping, listening to loud music, using cell phones, reading and the not-so-obvious distractions such as fatigue, anger, relationship problems and other types of emotional stress, among others.

How often, while driving or performing a task at work, have you found yourself distracted and poorly focused on the task at hand? Unfortunately, stress caused by workloads, relationship problems, poor diets and/or sleep deprivation all can cause distraction and compromise safety. The reality is that we are all partners when it comes to safety. Accordingly, we are responsible for both our own and each other's safety.

Frame of mind

Safety is a combination of understanding, managed risk, common sense and—above all—frame of mind.

Prehistoric man truly understood the dangers of his environment, as his life very much depended on personal awareness every minute of the day. In today's world, we are accustomed to "handing over" our safety to others, often ignoring our intuition, and rarely seeking to truly understand the dangers that accompany us every minute. Changing one's frame of mind begins when we actively seek understanding about the dangers within our working environment.

With management providing the safety tools and training, it is up to us as individuals to make that training personal. Many individuals work in potentially hazardous environments; risk is managed through understanding consequence of failure and being competent in our response to those failures. Thus, making an effort to fully comprehend your work environment and method of manufacturing or process deliverable is crucial to understanding and managing risks you face should a failure occur.

Stay well and aware

Learn to recognize both normal and abnormal equipment behavior. Check out the Material Safety Data Sheets of both production and maintenance materials. Know what you are handling. Being trained in confined space management is futile if you cannot personally recognize a true or marginal confined space within your workplace— without an identification signpost. Knowing how to operate an emergency wash station is wasted, if you don't know where the emergency wash stations are located.

Managing risk is all about marrying understanding, knowledge and common sense. However, developing and using a common sense approach to managing stressful and dangerous situations can be difficult to achieve when an individual's frame of mind is distracted and unable

to focus. To combat this, more and more companies now recognize that wellness—or an individual's good mental and physical health—is equally important as a safety-driven workplace culture in providing enhanced employee self-esteem and a clear frame of mind. In turn, this all translates into a much healthier, safer and more productive workforce.

Forward-thinking companies are now providing opportunity for their employees to elevate their personal fitness levels by offering differing workplace programs that include gymnasium sports, field sports, meditation and healthier, lighter fare in their company cafeterias. Mental health programs are rapidly on the rise and manifest themselves in workplace day care programs, personal counseling programs, education completion programs, generalinterest training programs, etc. These types of company-sponsored or sanctioned initiatives are all clearly aimed at cutting down the stress in employees' daily lives by significantly reducing distractions and growing healthier, safer workplace environments.

Be careful out there

Subscribing to a safer and healthier attitude toward work and life in general is all about developing and maintaining a true connection with your own self. Health and safety truly is a personal issue, connecting each and every one of us as partners. **MT**

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