

Leading The Safety Process

Written by Mike Bahr, National Technology Transfer, Inc.
Saturday, 01 October 2005 00:00

What corporations can do to increase safe work practices.

For the last seven years, I have been working in the electric utility construction industry as a Regional Safety Manager. During this period, I have had the misfortune of investigating many serious accidents, ranging from amputations to fatalities. A common thread running through all of these cases has been the fact that a shortcut was taken by one or more employees and a critical procedure was not followed.

Workplace culture as a driver

A line worker was in an aerial lift, working on a new overhead power line that was being installed along a rural gravel road. He was approaching an existing single-phase, 7200-volt overhead power line with a grounded AWG #2 triplex service drop cable in the boom's jib. He was going to connect a service drop to a transformer.

This young employee had moved the transformer earlier from an old 12.2-meter-tall pole to a new pole that was 13.7 meters tall. He was not wearing his rubber insulating gloves (which were still in the glove bag, hanging from the tool board in the bucket). Furthermore, he also had not placed the rubber insulating line hose (which was also in the bucket with him) on the energized phase conductor. No one was observing him while he was working.

He maneuvered the aerial lift bucket between the phase and neutral conductors on the existing power line, with the bucket at a 45-degree angle to the boom. The end of the triplex cable was inside the bucket with him. The existing line was located parallel to and closer to the gravel road than the new line being installed. The employee apparently contacted the phase conductor and was electrocuted. His supervisor found him slumped down in his bucket.

The OSHA data base is full of accident descriptions very similar to this one. They all have a couple of things in common:

- failure to follow proper procedure is a part of every accident listed; and
- experience and/
- or training, in most cases, do not appear to be an issue.

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There is a widespread misconception that many accidents occur simply because an employee is not following the rules, and that most injuries are the fault of the individual. That is not the case, however, as it's the cultures of our workplaces that drive everything we do.

Just recently, a senior lineman was killed when he was flung from an aerial lift after the bucket from which he was working had been caught under a tree branch. Sadly, he had not been wearing his fall-protection harness, which was required by company policy. In fact, he had been warned on several occasions about violating that policy.

While it's true that this tragedy resulted because a worker chose to violate a company policy, it was the company's safety culture that created the environment for him to make that decision. Had the proper safety culture existed, and the correct disciplinary action been taken when the initial violations were observed, this accident most likely would not have occurred.

Creating the proper culture

I believe that any company can achieve the goal of zero accidents. One of the first steps in the process is that you must treat safety as a core business value. If you approach safety as a process, or just another program, you will fail to motivate employees to incorporate it into their daily activities. If you make safety a core business value, it will become woven into everything you do, and every decision you make.

Sometimes, companies are lured into a false sense of security because they haven't had an injury in a year. They may think that they are doing everything right. The reality, though, is that they have just been lucky. Only when an employee's behaviors are constantly safe can you consider that you have successfully integrated safe work practices into your corporate culture.

Executive decisions

Many company presidents and CEOs across the country think that they are taking the correct steps toward improving their safety integration process by hiring a qualified safety professional, providing them with adequate financial resources and then telling everyone in a company memo that "Safety is Number One." Yet, these same executives find themselves frustrated year after year when the company continues to experience accidents and they are unable to reduce their injury rates. And why not? As popular author Stephen Covey tells us: "If we always do what we've always done, we'll always get what we've always got."

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Company executives who are frustrated over the inability to reduce injury rates within their organizations must someday come to the realization that they bear the ultimate responsibility for promoting a safety culture. They and their line management team must take 100-percent responsibility for integrating the safety process into their workforce. To accomplish this they must:

- Make it very clear that safety truly is the company's number one core value.
 - Believe that a zero accident/injury workplace is possible.
 - Set expectations for those who report to them and hold them accountable to those expectations with consequences for non-compliance.
 - Accept no excuses if things go wrong and non-compliance is a factor.
 - Address the issue immediately.
- And, most importantly:
- Model the safe behavior they expect of their employees.

There is no question that organizations with the greatest success rates at preventing accidents depend on line organization involvement in the safety process. But those in the line organization need support from the corporate leadership, as well as access to resources with the technical expertise to advise them and provide informed guidance for the overall safety program.

Companies that have achieved the greatest success at maintaining safety in the workplace do so by reviewing all of the elements of the safety process. You cannot just focus your efforts in one area, such as tightening discipline in a system that is out of control. It is only when all parts of the safety process are recognized and worked on that a successfully functioning safety culture can be realized.

Proper training

The importance of health and safety training in the workplace should never be underestimated. It is the key to success in managing safety in the work environment.

Proper safety performance in the workplace rests in the education and training of a company's greatest resource, their employees. The employees' acceptance and participation in a safety culture requires sufficient knowledge and understanding of the hazards that they may encounter in the performance of their duties as an employee.

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Companies that excel at promoting a safety culture have developed a comprehensive safety education system that includes budgeting regular, on-going employee, supervisor and project manager education and toolbox or task training. The positive returns on the training investment come in the form of improved safety performance, with the added benefit of a greater degree of competency and efficiency in task performance.

In order to have a successful health and safety education program, it must be considered as a regular part of the budget. The impact of the inclusion of safety training as a line item within the budget clearly demonstrates management commitment and promotes employee involvement.

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