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## PRODUCTIVITY & SAFETY - CAN YOU HAVE BOTH?

By SeaBright Insurance Loss Control

**P**roductivity and safety – Can you have both? Many people would answer the question with a definite “Yes” while others would answer just as confidently with, “No way!” Yet, even others would meet you in the middle with a response like, “Yes—but don’t get carried away too far with this safety stuff.”

### The “No” Responses:

Over time, responses to this exact question have been collected from managers and supervisors working throughout the western United States. Here are some responses from those who answered “No”:

- *“I have a critical production schedule to meet. The only way I can accomplish it is to have all of my employees working a full shift. Safety meetings and training sessions cut into that time.”*
- *“Some people want to work and some people don’t. The ones who don’t want to work are usually the ones that get hurt, and they are my biggest safety problem.”*
- *“I spent a lot of time and money training these people how to do the job. They’re adults. They just have to do it the way I told them and they won’t get hurt.”*
- *“I believe in safety, but some people really get carried away. I’ve got a business to run. Being safe or unsafe is all in a person’s head—it’s an attitude. If you can tell me how to get into their head, let me know. I’ll use it on my 15 year old son.”*
- *“Safety guards don’t work. They just slow down the process. My father worked 30 years without using a guard on his table saw and he never got hurt. At 70, he could run circles around what most of these kids produce now days using guards and push sticks.”*
- *“We do all of this safety stuff because OSHA and the government created a bureaucracy that just robs business through citations and fines.”*

### Why The “No” Arguments Just Don’t Make Sense:

The “no” comments boil down to three underlying beliefs. In some cases, while the manager’s negative attitude may be understandable, it cannot be justified when placed beside good management practices and procedures. Consider the following positive responses and proactive supervisory skills when confronted with these “no” attitudes:

## **“No” Attitude 1: “There’s no causal relationship between safety training and accident prevention.”**

While direct relationship between safety training and accident prevention is often difficult to prove. It is important to know that historically accident investigations rarely looked into whether the employee had been *adequately* trained, only *if* training had been completed. But evaluating the competency of training can shed light on an incident. Did the training thoroughly demonstrate the concept and emphasize the company’s requirements? Can you look back to the training and say, “this training clearly gave the injured worker the knowledge and tools to work safely at this task.”? Much like forklift training today, where not only classroom but in-the-seat observations must be completed, training can have a firm relationship with an incident. Did the orientation cover the hazards that created the injury and was the employee properly trained on the equipment and is there documentation to back it up?

**A good supervisor consistently monitors safe work behavior and re-trains those who are seen to be taking shortcuts.**

If workers aren’t well trained *before* they begin the job, how are they supposed to know the safety requirements that would result in safe production? And, if there is no *follow-up* to confirm their understanding, how can you be sure the initial safety orientation didn’t get “lost” among all the newness of the job? Statistics show the highest incidents of accidents happen to new and young workers. A good supervisor consistently monitors safe work behavior and re-trains those who are seen to be taking shortcuts that could result in injury or property damage.

Safety training need not always be a formal class with audiovisuals and written materials. Nor must it be crew-meeting messages that are so boring and repetitive they are no longer effective. Safety training *should* consist of strong, clear instructions, follow-up reinforcement by supervisors, and thorough accident or incident investigations that ask, “were the involved employees adequately trained and did they follow the procedures?”

## **“No” Attitude 2: “Accidents occur because of ‘poor attitudes’ or poor work ethics, which supervisors can’t control.”**

It would be nice if we could make everyone really like what they do and work as though their company was the best in the world. But that would be an unreasonable expectation. Individual attitudes are the product of experiences and choices that you, as a supervisor, can only make an impact during working hours. But let’s be clear, 90% of accidents occur because of someone’s incorrect or unwise behavior. Worker attitude plays an important role in producing unsafe conditions or doing unsafe acts.

Some believe the work ethic in the United States has weakened in recent decades, and it will continually change in the future. Eagle’s Loss Control experience confirms that the environment set by the management team goes a long way to determine the workers’ attitudes and whether or not they truly feel they are a part of the company’s “team.” Accidents can be prevented if all employees receive a strong and clear message that personal injury is not acceptable on the job and is a waste of the company’s most critical assets that they need to grow and prosper. Safety is as important as production and quality to make this occur.

As for those employees who *still* have “poor attitudes” about safety, it must be made very clear that “safe work behavior is a *condition of employment*.” Let the workers who create the unsafe conditions or work using unsafe methods find a job where the boss doesn’t pay any attention if they are careless! Injuries hurt both the employee and the company, and neither can afford it.

### **“No” Attitude 3: “Safety procedures get in the way of an efficient production process.”**

This belief is the “bottom line” argument against safe work procedures. Advocates of this attitude claim that the many codes and regulations are so “picky” or “complex,” they are counter-productive and do little to prevent accidents. But to rebel against all safety standards is to “throw the baby out with the bath water.”

**Accident costs can offset production profits far more than safety procedures.**

The bulk of the standards dealing occupational safety & health are broken out in a method that provide a somewhat customized accident prevention process for each industry. Ultimately, standards resulted from a large collection of statistics that broke-out which industries, which hazards, which tasks, and which behaviors were associated with serious accidents and fatalities. All of this research helps allow you, as a supervisor, to predict the highest hazards and exposures for employee injuries, and to prevent them through safety measures.

If safety requirements are thought to limit the production process, it must be argued that they are not cost-effective. However, accident costs can offset production profits far more than safety procedures or associated costs. Workers’ compensation insurance costs are the second or third highest expense of many businesses. The direct rates for these premiums, which increase with injuries just as your auto insurance increases with accidents, can take hundreds of thousands of dollars from the company’s profits. These lost dollars are direct loss by the company, increasing overhead and decreasing profits. These costs are only the insurance costs! This impact on the company’s bottom line does not include other significant costs such as the indirect costs of accidents. Studies estimate that for every dollar of accident cost, most companies spend \$2 to \$11 in hidden overhead costs that aren’t covered by insurance.

### **Safety AND Productivity... “YES!!”**

So what attitude should profit-minded managers and production minded supervisors take? It seems that everyone can remember a time when an enterprising business could be innovative and highly profitable without the government telling him or her what to do. But during this same time frame, history has demonstrated that while profits may have soared, a shameful record of needless occupational deaths and crippling injuries occurred during those times as well.

Today, firms have regulations and guidelines put in place by industry groups, as well as federal, state, county and local agencies. These groups and agencies set down minimum requirements, required processes and many times a significant amount of paperwork.

But arguing with personnel from agencies such as OSHA is not the way to increase production or profits. Businesses today can keep money in their own pocket by managing a safe work environment while maintaining high production.

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Neither “Production without Safety” nor “Safety without Production” works in today’s world, if success and profitability are goals of the company. Pushing production to a point where injuries and property damage become common is not good business. The company will pay more for workers’ compensation and property insurance as a result and need to build more products to replace those damaged in the rush to completion.

Give safety an equal footing to production and the company will run like a well-oiled machine. Strong safety programs and supervisory follow-through on monitoring safe work practices will ensure that experienced employees are at work producing product, not at home recuperating from a work related injury. In addition, there is the added benefit that fewer new and less productive employees must be hired, since skilled workers are on the job working safely.

Adding to the benefit of higher productivity and fewer injuries is the fact that because of improved safety & health, workers’ compensation insurance premium will drop relative to the company’s payroll. This drop lowers the company’s overhead, increasing the profit margin and/or making them able to be more competitive and bring in more work...keeping you and all of your crew steadily working.

Eagle Insurance Loss Control has helped hundreds of firms develop or strengthen their safety programs and recognize that Safety and Production must be on equal footing. We know that accident prevention is highly cost-effective. We know that companies that are growing are the most proactive about safety. We see many managers and supervisors who have the right attitude about protecting their employees from injury, through effective training, safe work standards and accident analysis. While the “no” attitude may still be heard at times, it does not allow companies to be successful today.

## **SAFETY & PRODUCTIVITY**

**You *can* have both! We see the success all of the time!**