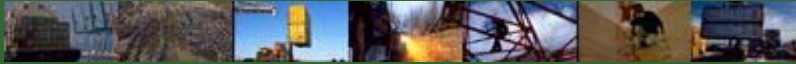




Supervisors' Safety Update

Ideas and Strategies for Leaders



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WHAT REALLY CAUSES ACCIDENTS?

By SeaBright Insurance Loss Control

Since the implementation of OSHA in 1970, we have controlled more physical hazards than at anytime in history. Yet, the frequency of accidents continues to occur at a high rate. One reason is the continued reliance on ineffective management practices.

Today, pressures to produce quality products at a very competitive price are greater than ever before. Operations that are analyzing their costs realize accidents impact the bottom line. To control these escalating costs, companies have focused on changing employee attitudes. Is this the correct practice or approach?

Attitude or Behavior ?

You have probably heard comments like “he has a bad attitude about safety.” To improve this “bad attitude”, contests, posters, slogans (“be alert,” “be careful,” “think”) and meetings are used. Unfortunately, these activities have produced little in the way of results.

Since it seems that changing the attitudes of employees has had limited success, what then can be done? This question was answered in a management article published by James Lee in the *Harvard Business Review*. In discussing working with employees, his conclusion was “***there is scant evidence that attitudes can be changed, and then behavior. But there is a mountain of evidence that belief is shown in the willingness to act. Therefore, strive for changes in behavior.***” As far as management practices are concerned, you do not find efforts in place to change employee attitudes. Emphasis **is** placed on changing behavior. This should tell us something.

Internal vs. External

It is important to understand the difference between attitude and behavior. Attitude has been described as an *internal* state that is based on conclusions we make from observing someone's behavior. For example, we may conclude that an employee has a "bad attitude towards safety" because he refuses to wear protective equipment or follow safety rules. Behavior, on the other hand, is the *external* indication of an internal state. ***Behavior is observable, while attitude is not.*** Consider this: managers and supervisors tell me how safety conscious they are, yet I later observed these same people performing unsafe acts! Is this a problem with their attitude or their behavior? Since we cannot know what anyone's attitude is, it appears we are dealing with a behavioral problem.

Consequences

This is consistent with what safety professionals have known for years – 85% of accidents are caused by unsafe acts that can be observed. . . . Actions or methods people do, or in other words, their behavior.

The consequences of this behavior can be a near miss incident, property damage, first aid case, serious injury or a fatality. These are "after the fact" measures of our failures, both employee and management, to use proper behavior.

Developing "Safe Behavior"

How do we develop safe behavior? Training is one of the most important tasks to be accomplished. Behaviors are a learned response and the right training programs can help build safe behaviors. Training is necessary to define expectations and the limits of acceptable behavior. No one can expect employees to exhibit proper behavior if they do not have the knowledge and skills necessary to behave safely on the job.

The second task is to identify and correct specific behavioral deficiencies. Once the deficiencies have been identified, solutions can be provided. Too often we respond to a safety deficiency based on preconceived biases or assumptions. The following is a way to analyze behavior by observing what a person does and then drawing conclusions based on those behaviors.

In general, behavioral deficiencies can be broken down into three categories: physical deficiencies, knowledge deficiencies, and execution deficiencies. Physical deficiencies arise from physical disabilities such as poor eyesight, or loss of hearing. A medical surveillance program detects these types of deficiencies.

All other deficiencies can be broken down into two categories: deficiencies of knowledge or deficiencies of execution. A knowledge deficiency results from an employee not knowing what to do, how to do it or when to do it. The way to identify the problems that have a training solution is to determine "if this person can do this task safely if their life depended on it?" If the answer is no, this indicates a need for training. If the answer is yes, training is unnecessary.

In general, behavioral deficiencies can be broken down into three categories:

- **physical deficiencies**
- **knowledge deficiencies**
- **execution deficiencies**

If a deficiency is not physical, or due to a lack of knowledge, it falls under the category of execution deficiency. This deficiency takes on different forms relative to safety. Employees often fail to exhibit safe behavior because they do not perceive it to be important to their supervision. Example: A new mechanic must occasionally use a bench grinder. He usually wears a face shield when grinding; however, when he sometimes forgets to wear it, it doesn't result in any reaction from his manager. Furthermore, wearing it or not results in neither positive nor negative feedback. This kind of behavior deficiency is encouraged if management does not correct it.

Often employees perform unsafe actions because their environment does not allow safe behavior to occur. Example: We tell our employees to keep their work area cleaned and scrap out of aiseways; however, we don't provide them receptacles to discard the material and we have crowded workspaces. These behavior deficiencies can be avoided by re-engineering the task and the environment to accommodate our expectations.

The causes of accidents are a "people problem." The "safety attitude" we strived for in the 70s and 80s can be achieved if we focus on supporting employees' demonstrated "Safety Behavior."