

A Culture of Safety

By Richard Hoelscher, CLLM

Recent industry headlines depict too many unfortunate encounters between laundry employees and robotic shuttles, dryers, or confined spaces. Every laundry manager earnestly hopes that their facility will be spared that kind of tragedy. They believe they have good policies and procedures in place and a serious or fatal accident "won't happen here."

But, the reality is accidents do occur and one fatality is one fatality too many. These sobering consequences present a very real danger and the question becomes, "How can we, as an industry, protect our most valuable resource?"

Successful managers know that workers are the most valuable resource and that a safe worker is more likely to be content and less likely to go job hunting. The solution may reside in the commitment of management to provide a "culture of safety." Employees have a greater respect for management that truly cares about their welfare which translates into improved productivity and fewer employee problems. Improved productivity with less lost time, lower worker turnover and lower worker compensation claims, results in a better financial bottom line. Laundries with an outstanding "culture of safety," by their very nature, are typically those with outstanding customer service, excellent quality, efficiencies, and employee satisfaction.

A culture of safety does not begin with a review of safety policies and procedures. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) defines culture of safety as a shared commitment of management and employees to ensure the safety of the work environment. A culture of safety requires a change in attitude. The culture permeates all aspects of the work environment. It encourages every individual in an organization to project a level of awareness and accountability for safety. The goal becomes zero injuries, accidents, or work-related illness. It is not enough

to say "Here are the rules, follow them!" Employees perceive the presence of a culture of safety based on factors that include:

- ◆ Actions taken by management to improve safety,
- ◆ Worker participation in safety planning,
- ◆ Availability of appropriate safety devices and protective equipment,
- ◆ Availability of written safety guidelines and policies,
- ◆ Influence of group norms regarding acceptable safety practices, and
- ◆ Socialization processes around safety that personnel experience when they first join an organization.

This philosophy acknowledges that errors may occur, but they proactively seek to identify the error, not who made the error. It creates an environment where employees feel safe to report an error or a near-miss without fear of punishment or reprisal. They develop a proactive approach to prevent accidents and not finger pointing or a blaming mind-set. This does not relieve the employee of the responsibility for reporting problems, but encourages them to freely and openly report a potentially unsafe situation or prevent one from occurring. Don't expect change overnight, changes in attitude take time. To successfully create a culture of safety, the employee must believe that they are crucial to the organization. An early step could be to engage a neutral third party to conduct an anonymous survey of the employees to determine what they perceive as the current philosophy of safety. Determine where they feel unsafe and where

they would like to see improvements in safety made. Have the survey tabulated and review the results with the employees. This is an opportunity for improving the overall culture of the organization as well as the safety of all employees.

But as with all real change, it must begin at the top and permeate the organization. Management must embrace all aspects of safety from the start with a clear understanding of the guidelines and regulations that to protect workers from unsafe situations. Focus should be placed on the practical applications of safety.

If an issue is important, thorough instruction is provided, results are measured, and adjustments made as necessary to obtain the desired results. Consider this, how much time is spent training at your facility on processing methods and wash formulas as compared to safe work practices? Where is the focus? Where is time being spent? What message is being sent to your employees about what you consider to be important?

Some managers practice MBWA (management by walking around). How often do you, as a manager, stop to instruct a front-line employee on proper loading techniques or production issues? Compare that with the number of times you stopped to instruct an employee on proper safety measures or proper use of PPE.

Do you, as a manager, comply with safety measures as you walk through the plant? Do you don required PPE when on the soil side of the operation? Do you wash your hands and remove PPE as you leave the soiled sorting area? Do you walk through the soiled side with a cup of coffee in-hand knowing that OSHA prohibits food or beverage in the soiled linen area for employee safety?

Lead by example, your employees are watching you! Employees will imitate their leaders for good or for bad. Management adherence to safety practices will speak volumes about what management considers important. Do not violate a policy or procedure by taking shortcuts. If a supervisor or leader doesn't value safe operation then how can you expect a front-line employee to follow them? It is management's responsibility to ensure that an unsafe individual be removed from an environment where they are likely to hurt themselves or cause injury to others.

The facility's Lockout and Tagout written policy/procedures may satisfy an OSHA requirement, but does the policy work and does management make it easy to follow? When lockout procedures are utilized does staff follow the procedure or succumb to the perceived need to get the product out the door and fail to utilize their best judgment thereby resulting in an injury or accident? Actions speak louder than words.

Complete a hazard or risk assessment in your plant. Walk through the operation to determine jobs/areas where an employee could be injured or exposure could cause illness. Form teams to brainstorm and identify opportunities to eliminate danger. Include representatives from all departments (production, supervisors, human resources, management, maintenance, front line workers). Employees know better than anyone where the dangers are.

Employees with ownership in the process are more likely to adhere to the policies and procedures. Don't write off any idea too quickly as impossible, unrealistic, or impractical. Search for safer alternatives to get the job done and be willing and open to learn about new ideas. Training and review teams must understand the issues and laws governing privacy but they should review the workers' compensation reports as these records can help identify patterns and trends where accidents or injury occur frequently.

Review and investigate how each injury, accident, or illness (near misses as well) occurred to determine how it may have been prevented. Did the injury/accident/illness occur because of a lack of training? Was safety equipment readily available? What contributed to the incident? Were there warning signs of potential danger before the incident occurred? What would the safest person have done differently and what can be done in the future to stop it from reoccurring?

The safety team should address issues related to fire, electrical, hazardous chemicals, bio-hazards, sharps, equipment, confined space, ergonomics, repetitive motion, falls, egress, workplace violence, heat stress, noise and more. Projects to consider may include:

- ◆ Painting aisles and danger zones with a specific color,
- ◆ Changing/posting policies and procedures,

- ◆ Training all team leaders, supervisors, and managers that safety is more important than productivity,
- ◆ Purchase safety devices and implement with training and proper use,
- ◆ Improve maintenance and repairs of both equipment and the building,
- ◆ Replace unsafe equipment that cannot economically be made safe,
- ◆ Improve cooling and ventilation, particularly important in a laundry,
- ◆ Add cooling stations and breaks,
- ◆ Changing materials/products to those that are easier and safer to process,
- ◆ Change chemicals and dispensing systems to those that are safer,
- ◆ Change or add mats and work platforms to improve ergonomics and stance, and
- ◆ Rotating employees around workstations more often.

Developing an implementation plan that prioritizes projects is a critical step. Attempting to do everything at once will get very little, if anything, accomplished. If a current policy or procedure is too complicated or unenforceable, the policy or procedure needs to be redesigned.

Incorporate safety into your hiring processes. Ask applicants if they have ever been asked to perform a task they felt was dangerous. What have they done to be more proactive in creating a safe working environment? Their answers may provide an indicator on how safe you can expect them to be in the future. Educate employees on how to be safe before they begin work. Inform them of the open reporting policy. Re-educate when changes occur to avoid complacency. Don't ask an employee if they understand; ask what they would do in a specific situation. One US car manufacturer utilizes an assembly line stop button at every employee work-station on the assembly line. If an employee sees a problem with the quality of the product or a safety issue, any employee at any time may stop the line to have it corrected. They have ownership of the quality and safety in their plant. They also produce a high quality product with a very low employee injury/accident rate.

"Businesses spend \$170 billion a year on costs associated with occupational injuries, accidents, and illnesses-expenditures that come straight out of company profits. But, workplaces that establish safety and health management systems can reduce their injury and illness costs by 20 to 40 percent. In today's business environment, these costs can be the difference between operating in the black and running in the red."

"Injuries and illnesses increase workers' compensation, retraining costs, absenteeism, and faulty production. Injuries and illnesses also decrease productivity, morale, and profitability. Businesses operate more efficiently when they implement effective safety and health management systems. A Fortune Five Hundred company increased productivity by 13 percent, while a small, 50-person plant decreased faulty product and saved more than \$265,000 with a strong safety and health program."

OSHA also offers a Free Small Business Safety Consultation Service. "Businesses that partner with OSHA through the Voluntary Protection Programs (VPP) have 50 percent fewer lost workday injuries and illnesses than the average for their industry and incidence rates 50 percent below the national average. VPP companies have saved more than \$1 billion since 1982."

Periodically throughout the redesign of the laundry safety program take a look back and review the progress and report that to the staff. Continually measure, report and reward progress. Remind everyone where the laundry started and what the continuing goals are. Don't become complacent. Continually seek out ways for improvement. The goal should be no injuries, accidents, or work-related illnesses for every plant.

OSHA web site:
<http://www.osha.gov/publications/safety-health-addvalue.html>

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