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By Judy Agnew

Is Your Company Safe by Accident?

Five science-based strategies to improve safety

Despite decades of reductions in deaths and injuries on construction sites, accidents continue to happen. In other industries in the last 10 years, there have been at least nine industrial accidents resulting in more than 125 deaths. Two accidents in 2010, the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico and the Upper Big Branch mining disaster in West Virginia, also wreaked economic havoc on the communities where they occurred, and incalculable environmental impact in the case of the Gulf disaster.

Why are catastrophic accidents on the rise?

The Deepwater Horizon offshore oil rig operated for seven consecutive years without a single lost-time incident or major environmental event. By that measure they were safe. We now know that for those seven years they were, at least to some extent, "safe by accident." By all reports, many unsafe conditions and behaviors existed at all levels of the organization that had, through sheer luck, not resulted in an accident. On April 20, 2010, the luck ran out. This pattern is not unique to the Deepwater Horizon case. Based on decades of research and work with many of the world's leading corporations, we've concluded that many companies are safe by accident because they focus too heavily on incident rates and don't take a scientific approach to managing safe and at-risk behavior. Sophisticated companies that rely on science and technology in their businesses, only use so-called common sense, myth, and downright faulty information to manage the behavior of their employees.

There is a better way. In-depth knowledge of the science of behavior can enable leaders and safety professionals to build systems that create a lasting corporate-wide commitment to safety—from the boardroom, to supervisors, to the front lines. Organizations that fail to take a scientific approach to safety's human-behavior element are gambling with their futures and are ultimately only safe by accident.

This is not intended to be an indictment of leaders, because the role of leaders in safety has been poorly defined. Vague phrases such as "making safety a priority" or "creating a safety culture" have little meaning. What should a leader do to ensure a safe work environment? Leaders need to focus on strategies that have the greatest impact. To help companies create a "culture of safety," here are five science-based rules to get started.

1. Don't base safety incentives on incident rates. Having zero incidents is the ultimate goal of safety, but this flawed system unintentionally rewards luck, can encourage employees to not report incidents to avoid losing the incentive, and may result in reinforcing unsafe and unethical behavior. Instead, motivational systems should be based on preventative measures. By setting up a system that reinforces safe behaviors directly linked to desired results, you will get more people engaging in preventative behaviors, which will naturally reduce your incident rate.

2. Understand the value of near misses. Whether in an office or a factory, there should be a prescribed way to produce a product or service in a safe manner. Any deviation from that should be classified as a near miss so that lessons can be learned. Near misses tend to go unreported because of perceived management backlash when in fact management actions and organizational systems contribute to at-risk behavior. When managers are committed to 'sweating the small stuff' and developing systems to evaluate and correct near misses, safe habits that preclude errors can be developed.

3. Mistakes should not be punished. Employees often fail to report safety concerns because they fear reprisal. Punishing unsafe behavior creates a culture of cover-ups where employees play the blame game. Incidents, near misses and at-risk behaviors all provide valuable opportunities to learn how to make the workplace safer. Discipline, reprimands and other forms of punishment stifle reporting and make achieving a culture of safety impossible. Instead, consider performing behavioral investigations and practice forward-thinking accountability.

4. Understand the limited value of checklists. Checklists can be an important tool for developing safe behavior and producing long-lasting change, but sometimes people assume the very implementation is all that is required to change behavior. Checklists alone only result in temporary change. Items should be observed apart from the checklist to ensure quality and safety. In addition, checklists should be associated with positive consequences to ensure they are used consistently.

5. Safety signage should serve a purpose. Inspirational signs ("Think Safety") don't change behavior. Without the clutter of meaningless signs, employees may be less likely to ignore important signage. Use only compliance signs that direct specific behavior ("Hearing protection required in this area") and informational signs when appropriate and relevant.

Taking the luck out of safety requires leaders to let go of outdated, low-impact strategies and replace them with evidence-based practices that create a safer workplace.