

A Case Study: A Tale of Safety¹

This is a story about people who changed their work life in dramatic and simple ways. It didn't happen by luck or chance and these people are little different from you and me. This story is being repeated in different ways in dozens of companies across this country.

What these employees did and are continuing to do is improve safety performance by actively influencing both the behaviors and attitudes of co-workers. Safety clearly is not the only beneficiary. These employees also affected union-management relations, workplace morale, employee self-esteem, and team cohesiveness in exciting and rewarding ways.

The story begins with a small group of employees with a particular interest in safety. Some were already involved in a site-wide safety committee for their chemical processing plant. Others were informal leaders in their work groups. The plant safety committee's focus was on the equipment side of safety but they recognized there was more they could do. They looked for and secured some help to make a broader impact on safety through a behavior-based and person-based approach.

The essence of their process for "Steering Toward an Injury-Free Workplace" is employee involvement in identifying and solving safety concerns. These concerns focus on behavior or the way employees perform their jobs but also encompasses equipment, training, and procedures. For example, the list of outcomes work groups credit to their observation-based problem solving process involves behavior changes, new training, greater responsiveness, and more accurate procedures.

SAMPLE OBSERVATION PROCESS OUTCOMES
⇒ "Fork truck operators regularly use horns at intersections"
⇒ "Co-workers bring it to your attention if you are working at-risk"
⇒ "Changes in the lock-out/tag-out procedure implemented"
⇒ "Faster responses to safety work orders"

Each work group is charged with selecting their targeted behaviors for observation, determining their own interventions, and choosing their own means of recognizing and rewarding group members. Some groups narrowly focused their attention on specific observations of chlorine bottle changing, lock out, or fork truck operation. Other groups concentrated on types of behavior including personal protective equipment use or housekeeping.

The key is each group making its own decisions with the guidance of a representative from the Behavioral Leadership Team. After each round of observations, the groups work through a problem solving process to improve the behaviors targeted. Observations are voluntary but strongly encouraged. In two years, the facility has achieved 85% participation in the peer observation process.

The Behavioral Leadership Team, dominated by hourly employees, is led by the plant safety manager and safety champion, an hourly worker selected by the team. The team continues to meet bi-weekly to communicate lessons learned, share successes, and plan future behavioral safety efforts. At first, the "Champ" took a lot of ribbing from his co-workers as he took on this new role. He found his own work practices were watched closely by others, many hoping to "catch" him working at-risk. Today, he finds people more willing to come to him to discuss safety concerns or ideas.

One of the most rewarding side benefits of this employee participative safety effort is improved union-management relations. This 50+ year-old facility experienced some frosty periods including a strike/lock-out. The local union president has been a strong advocate for participation in the peer observation process as has the plant manager. In fact, they both signed formal announcement when peer observation and coaching training began stating their support of the process and their commitment to keeping it voluntary and non-punitive.

[insert graph showing decreasing recordable injuries]

From 17 recordable injuries in 1995, the facility of approximately 200 has successfully managed that number to 10 in 1996 and to 7 in 1997. Additionally, the plant just celebrated 1,000,000 hours without a day-away-from-work injury. While these numbers are impressive, they only tell the outcome of the story. The safety process itself is being measured in new and progressive ways. These measures are upstream indicators of the safety process and are largely in the control of employees. All employees participate in a quarterly incentive program based on these measures.

<p>1997-98 Plant Safety Measures</p> <p>Safety meetings/training per employee Safety inspections/audits/drills Behavioral observations Safety concerns identified Incidents reported/investigated Behavioral process participation Incident-to-Injury ratio DO IT processes completed Safety work orders completed “10 Most Wanted” (equipment repairs) completion rate</p>
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Will this story have a happy ending? Have these employees achieved Utopia in northeastern Missouri? Are they resting on their laurels? Certainly not. But they are on the path of continuous improvement “Steering Toward an Injury-Free Workplace” and they understand it is a journey not a destination.