

## **Entitlement Thinking: A Barrier to People Accepting Personal Responsibility for Safety**

Last month my *ISHN* contribution discussed perceptions of the wage worker in America, as viewed by the author of “Nickle and Dimed.” I attempted to increase reader empathy for these employees, as well as introduce some human dynamics relevant to industrial safety. This month’s article also offers wage-worker perspectives related to occupational safety, but the focus is on **how** people are paid rather than **how much** they are paid.

Let me begin with my premise: the way most wage workers are compensated in U.S. industry encourages and supports entitlement thinking, which hinders acceptance of personal responsibility for optimizing performance, including safety. Problems related to entitlement thinking have occurred to me for many years, but I never linked wage contingencies to this human condition until reading a thoughtful book by William B. Abernathy—“The Sins of Wages” (1996, PerfSys Press). So, what do I mean by “entitlement thinking” and how can such a mindset hinder safety performance?

### **Entitlement Thinking**

As a human dynamic or mindset, “entitlement thinking” is a belief that basic personal comforts are natural and inevitable, even owed to people. In other words, regardless of individual effort, people believe they deserve to have their basic needs met—they are “entitled.”

Does this sound like Marxist communism or socialism? Does this perspective seem contrary to the capitalistic work ethic on which American industry was founded? While you may disagree that such entitlement thinking permeates

our culture, it is reasonable to assume that this perspective can stifle personal responsibility to achieve peak performance. And, we can't deny the existence of certain societal contingencies that encourage entitlement thinking. I'm not picking on welfare, retirement, or work compensation programs in this regard, although a case could be made that aspects of these social systems encourage entitlement thinking. Instead, let's consider a much more serious and large-scale contributor to an entitlement perspective -- the way many are paid for their work.

### **Entitlement Pay**

Yes, the low minimum wage (currently \$5.15 per hour) creates hardship for many workers, as I discussed last month. But, how about the fact that most wage workers are paid for their time, not for behavior or performance results? It doesn't matter how well the worker performs, the compensation is the same. Furthermore, increases in one's hourly pay are more often based on time in service (or seniority) than contributions to organizational effectiveness.

As the trite expression goes, "you get what you pay for." Organizations compensate employees for their time, and that's what they get—time on the job. Now I'm reminded of Parkinson's law, experienced by most readers—"work expands to fill the time available." Don't blame people for this. It's human nature to exert the minimum effort required to obtain desired consequences.

Some people are especially conscientious and go beyond the call of duty. They put in more time than they're paid for, and they do higher quality work than most within the allotted time. Organizations do reward some of these special performers for their dedication and ability to produce exceptional results. They get

promoted. More often than not, this involves a transition to a management position in a new industrial setting.

How ironic—the performers achieving the best results at a particular job are promoted to a different job in a new organizational setting. And if these responsible industrial workers are less talented in their new position, it's okay. They still receive an increase in compensation for their *time*. They're entitled, regardless of their behavior or accomplishments.

How do the average, less-than-exceptional workers “earn” their pay increases? Of course, we know the answer, because we've all been there. Even if our behavior on the job remains the same, we're entitled to successive increases in pay, right? We call this a “cost-of-living” adjustment. More irony—we give people a fixed increase in compensation for their time to compensate for inflation which in turn is caused, in part, by steady increases in compensation. So, in order to cover successive wage increases that cannot be absorbed by profits, companies reduce their workforce and out-source.

### **Entitlement Thinking and Safety**

How does entitlement thinking influence participation in safety-related programs? This is a useful topic for conversation. It's likely group discussions will reveal a number of ways an entitlement perspective impacts safety at your facility. Here are three possibilities.

- Should employees receive prizes or a financial bonus based on injury statistics? Such programs may simply reduce the reporting of injuries. But try removing this ineffective approach to motivating safety participation and

you'll likely experience entitlement thinking. "You can't do that, we're entitled."

- Are workers entitled to an optimal "fail-safe" work environment? I've heard employees use such entitlement thinking as an excuse for not participating in a behavior-based safety process. "Why should we change our behavior when management has not given us the safe environment we deserve?"

Of course, it's important to remove as many environmental hazards as possible, and to provide employees with the most comfortable and effective personal protection equipment (PPE) available. But, it's often not economically feasible to make work settings "fail safe" and upgrade all PPE. Employees need to take personal responsibility to help themselves and others adjust their behavior so as to keep out of harm's way. Indeed, the safest environment in many situations would replace employees with robotics.

- Shouldn't employees expect their local safety professional to handle all safety-related concerns and do whatever it takes to keep the organization injury free? I bet many safety pros have experienced and bemoaned this entitlement perspective. In a similar view, I've heard workers claim their compliance with safety rules and regulations is all the responsibility they need to accept for injury prevention.

### **Can We Reduce Entitlement Thinking?**

In his book "The Sins of Wages", Bill Abernathy describes a performance-based pay system to substitute for the traditional pay-for-time approach. For

most readers, making this kind of change in their organization is beyond their domain of influence. Here are a few alternative strategies, which may be less effective, yet are within the personal control of many.

**Eliminate management by perception.**

Unfortunately, most performance appraisals are not objective measures of individual performance. Too often, they are based on subjective opinions of such nebulous concepts as “enthusiasm,” “self-motivation,” and “conscientiousness.” If these evaluations were more behavior-based and results-oriented, workers’ payment for time would reflect what they actually do on the job. So we should ask for and use objective, performance-based appraisals.

**Eliminate management by exception.**

An easy but ineffective way to manage job performance is to look for mistakes and activate a corrective action plan. This might direct workers’ attention to what they are doing, but not to the important stuff—what they are doing well. Plus, it can facilitate a failure-avoidance mindset. As I discussed in my *ISHN* contribution last February (2004), this mindset is detrimental to a person’s self-confidence, personal control, and optimism, and ultimately hinders their performance.

Bottom line: Use objective, behavior-based criteria to recognize those who perform well. Do this frequently and consistently. Also, help people experience the natural rewarding consequences of performing their job

effectively and safely. This nourishes a success-seeking attitude that can starve entitlement thinking.

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## Scale to Measure Degree of Entitlement Thinking

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
1. I honestly feel I'm just more deserving than others.	1	2	3	4	5
2. Great things should come to me	1	2	3	4	5
3. If I were on the Titanic, I would deserve to be on the <i>first</i> lifeboat!	1	2	3	4	5
4. I demand the best because I'm worth it.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I do not necessarily deserve special treatment.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I deserve more things in my life.	1	2	3	4	5
7. People like me deserve an extra break now and then.	1	2	3	4	5
8. Things should go my way.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I feel entitled to more of everything.	1	2	3	4	5