

The Mystery of "The Safety Culture"

Many of you have heard me say safety is not rules on a bulletin board, or regulations imposed by various agencies. You have also heard me say that safety is an "attitude", as well as your attitude, and your company's attitude. Really, what do these statements mean?

Let me begin by telling you a short story. I have two clients, one in Southern California and one in Northern California. Both of these families own garbage companies, and ironically, both have very low experience modifications, which result in extremely low incidents of job related injuries, as well as property and vehicle accidents. If you were to visit either of these companies, you would learn that they hold monthly corporate safety meetings. At one company, the Chairman and CEO chairs the meeting. In the other company, the President and Vice-President chair and conduct the meeting. All of the responsible managers from all divisions attend the meeting. Each manager discusses how the injury or accident occurred, and gives his or her explanation of how they intend to prevent it from happening in the future. In addition, any punitive or corrective actions that have been undertaken are discussed.

Ironically, these two companies have developed a "Safety Culture", whose foundation starts at the top. This foundation rests on top management's commitment to safety, not just idle talk of safety, and is in fact a commitment that requires total involvement.

Examples of this "Safety Culture" include several behaviors that become the "normal" way of life in a company. These behaviors include, but are not limited to the following examples:

- Employees come to work and put on their required "personal protective equipment"

automatically without even thinking about it.

- Employees perform their various employment tasks safely and efficiently and are properly trained, evaluated and re-trained, if necessary.
- Employees' expectations include acknowledgement for safe and efficient work behavior, and discipline and/or training if an injury or accident occurs.
- Employees feel that they are "in" on things and take pride in their work and their company.
- Employees care about each other, and as a result, take care of one another.

These are only a few of the benefits that result from creating an effective "safety culture".

Many of us in the refuse industry are so caught up with the politics and operational challenges that we do not realize that safety and operations must be integrated, and as a result, will increase productivity and profits.

Once again, I have observed that the large refuse companies are again re-organizing and re-grouping their losses. Have you read the recent articles that illustrate how many people are injured or killed in the refuse industry? Many of these injuries, as well as deaths, were unfortunate and unnecessary. An efficient safety program, integrated with refuse operation, would have prevented a great number of these incidents.

Some of you that read this article will not agree with these opinions. Unfortunately, "the proof is in the pudding", so to speak, when OSHA arrives. Many business owners do not realize what jeopardy they are placing their companies in without an effective safety program. It is like spinning the roulette wheel in Las Vegas. Most of the time nothing happens, then suddenly the

"big win" occurs. Except the "big win" is usually a win for OSHA in the form of large fines and penalties.

At the same time that I am writing this article, a bulldozer operator is being prosecuted criminally for not performing a pre-trip inspection that would have revealed that his backing alarm was not functioning. This operator backed into a front loader driver that was standing next to his truck cleaning out the area behind the packing blade. In addition, the operator's supervisor may also be prosecuted.

These are changing times for our industry. Safety, more than ever, is important not only to safe lives and prevent injuries, but to ensure that the future of our companies will be there for our next generation.

An effective safety program is within your grasp. It only takes the commitment of top management and the hard work of all who are involved. Effective supervisors are the key to an effective safety program. Training supervisors on how to perform their duties and be persuasive leaders, not authoritarian bosses, is the key.

Remember that safety is not rules and regulations. It is the attitude of you, your company, and all who are involved. In closing, it is your choice to go into the future effectively creating the reality of your company, or accepting and becoming a victim to the losses and regulators.

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