

The Hierarchy of Safety, Health, and Environmental Management

When the plant manager sits down for the weekly staff meeting he/she is surrounded by those people with direct control and responsibility for all aspects of the business—department managers. If a problem comes up—say, for example, if costs are running too high—the manager does not turn to the finance manager, casting blame and dictating that he/she work harder to cut costs. Instead, a good manager, knowing that cost overruns can occur anywhere, will try to pinpoint the problem so that efforts to resolve the problem can be properly focused. The manager knows that everyone sitting around that table has a responsibility to control costs and, likewise, is responsible for managing production or service, quality, people, and so on. These department managers in turn hold supervisors and employees accountable for the same charge. In other words, because any employee can damage product, affect quality, or run up costs, all employees must be held accountable for ensuring that production is met, quality is high, and costs are kept to a minimum. That is simply a part of the job;

therefore, every employee makes up the production, service, quality, and cost organizations.

Why do we so often manage employee safety and health in different ways? At many facilities the safety–health manager is sometimes no more than a warm body. Often the ranking manager will assign responsibility for managing safety and health to an employee who is nearing retirement, or to a supervisor or middle manager who has little or no safety training as a collateral duty. Or perhaps the organization does go out and hire a bone fide safety professional; rarely is the individual a part of the manager’s weekly staff meeting or agenda.

Even in large companies, who supposedly have good safety and health management systems, an individual who may be well qualified to manage will often be given the responsibility of managing environmental, health and safety (EHS) without the benefit of a staff, or authority to delegate. The individual’s hands are tied and management effort is restricted to chairing the safety committee and making recommendations.

At one large facility employing over 2,000 workers, the plant manager and safety manager got into a heated disagreement. The safety manager ended up quitting that evening only to be replaced the very next morning by a young man who only the day before was a sewing machine mechanic in the same facility.

Did this plant manager consider safety so unimportant that anyone could take over and manage safety and health? And how much authority would he be willing to give to this new young safety manager? He would not be likely to seek advice from the young novice, nor would department managers or supervisors be likely to entertain his suggestions regarding issues within their respective areas of responsibility.

If it had been the human resources manager or the finance director who had quit, it’s a sure bet that this young man would not have been appointed to either of these two jobs. The jobs are too important. They require a special knowledge and understanding of things beyond the mechanic’s present education and background.

The message that the plant manager is conveying is that employee safety and well-being are of less importance than other functions. He does not view safety and health as something that should require education or special knowledge. But like many people, this plant manager does not understand the complexities of an effective safety and health management system, nor the specialized training and knowledge needed to effectively manage these systems.

This is a true story that actually did happen, and sadly it is more the norm when it comes to EHS management. We simply do not manage EHS with the same emphasis and enthusiasm as we do other functions. Even when it comes to enforcement, we fail to hold employees to the same level of accountability for using hearing protection, safety glasses, and lockout procedures as we do punctuality and insubordination. We do not enforce safety and health rules and procedures with the same emphasis as we do other rules and procedures.

At one facility the safety manager complained that there was a particular employee who would hitch a ride on the forks of the first passing forklift whenever he wanted to go anywhere within the plant. "I have told him every day not to do that yet he still does it and I don't know how to get him to stop," complained the safety-health manager. When asked what would happen if the employee were late for work, the safety manager stated that any tardy employee would receive a verbal warning on the first offense, a written warning on the second offense, suspension without pay on the third offense, and termination on the fourth offense.

So, why does this company not manage safety and health rules in the same way that they manage rules for punctuality? Does this mean that safety is less important than getting to work on time? It would be foolish to expect an employee to change his/her behavior, knowing that the convenience of the free ride meant more to this employee than did the consequences. In other words, the company did not enforce safety and health rules in the same way that they did other rules. They did not manage the EHS system the same way or with the same emphasis as other issues. Until they do, they can continue to expect safety violations to result in injuries and illnesses.

In every organization, regardless of how safe the tasks and facilities may be, employees can be injured or even killed while on the job. Since any employee can be injured or killed, every employee is responsible for safety. Thus, every employee makes up the safety-health-environmental organization.

THE SAFETY COP

A department head says to the safety manager, "You should have been here last night. John was working on the packaging machine and didn't have it locked out." The response of the safety manager

is, “I can’t be here 24 hours a day to police everything that goes on inside this plant.” What makes the department head think that he did not have a responsibility to take action to enforce the violation and possibly prevent an amputation or fatality? The safety manager in this true-case scenario has become the safety cop.

The safety cop is the one who goes around the workplace day after day reminding employees to don safety glasses and earplugs; lockout equipment; or clear access to eyewashes, exits, and fire extinguishers. This should not be the routine of the safety–health manager. These are issues for which employees and supervisors must be held accountable. The employee must be held responsible for the condition of his/her immediate work environment, including any safety and health issues. They and they alone are responsible for ensuring that they are prepared to begin work each day by having proper protective equipment and that the equipment is properly locked out using personal locks and following all lockout procedures. It is part of the job and cannot be delegated to other workers. Any company that has a safety cop does not have an effective safety management system.

Safety–health managers should not be safety cops any more than the finance director or finance manager should be the finance cop going around monitoring the amount of waste, or if employees are damaging equipment or otherwise costing the company more money than is necessary. For one thing, this policing cannot be done effectively. That is the responsibility of the employee and the supervisor.

In order to make the workplace safe and meet OSHA compliance, there are literally hundreds, sometimes thousands, of machines, pieces of equipment, tools, processes, and other things that require inspection. Additionally, all employees require some level of safety training, records must be maintained and accidents investigated, noise and chemical exposures must be monitored, and written policies must be established. In other words, the job is too big for one individual or even a small team to accomplish. But even if an individual could do these things alone, this is not the way to manage safety and health. The safety cop style of management leads employees to believe that the safety–health manager is solely responsible for EHS. When workers do not have an active role in safety and health, they move away from their own EHS responsibilities and the EHS system.

While many managers will say that safety comes first, the reality is the bottom line, and bottom-line management often relegates

safety to the back burner, in spite of all good intentions. And it could easily be argued that realistically speaking, safety cannot come before production or quality. After all, we don't build plants to have good safety systems. We build plants to produce a product or provide a service in order to make money. Without production or service, there won't be a need for safety and health since the facility will be closing down.

It could also be argued that it is more important to manage safety and health effectively than production, quality, and other management responsibilities, because the worst thing that could happen if we were to fail to effectively manage production would be for the company to go out of business or the plant to close. But if we failed to effectively manage safety and health, then people would lose their lives.

The question should not be which comes first or which is more important. Instead, we should manage all aspects of the business, including safety and health, equally. We should be asking if we involve employees in matters of safety and health to the same extent that we do production. Do we enforce safety rules and procedures with the same emphasis as other rules?

There will be times when a choice must be made between production and safety, but such choices will be made on a case-by-case basis as it is not always feasible to choose safety over production, especially in cases where the safety issue is deemed an acceptable risk versus a production issue that could bankrupt the company if not corrected. But the issue of managing safety and health is less about choosing between safety and production as it is ensuring that safety is managed as effectively. When we assign safety and health responsibilities to an individual and that individual is perceived as the safety cop, then we are not managing safety and health as we do other issues.

EMPLOYEE INVOLVEMENT

At one plant, the plant manager's executive secretary has prominently posted in the lobby, for all to see, a graph showing the rise in production that the plant has experienced over the first 6 months, since the new plant manager came on board. There is a great deal of pride in this accomplishment throughout the entire workforce because employees can see the numbers and take pride in their efforts. The plant manager is also proud because, after all,

that is the very reason why he was hired, to improve production. And being the good manager he is, he has taken every opportunity to remind workers that this is the fruit of their hard work and it is their success as much as his.

During a EHS management system inspection an outside auditor pointed out a need for fall protection installed on the tops of equipment. The plant manager, concerned about the cost of installing rails, asked if there were an alternative and was told that until fall protection could be installed, workers who climb on top of the equipment would have to wear harnesses and lanyards with which to tie off. "Look," explained the manager, "our employees think that things like safety harnesses and belts are silly, and I can't make them wear things like that."

The auditor complimented the manager on his success in increasing production, asking how he accomplished such a feat. "We simply looked at where we were and laid out a plan to reach some goals, then told people what to do," replied the manager. "What would happen if the workers didn't do as you told them?" asked the auditor. "Well, we'd just get rid of them. I'm not going to lose my job like the last plant manager did." The auditor then pointed out how production and safety were not being managed in the same way:

If you want to improve your safety you look at where you are, determine where you want to go and lay out your plan to get there. What you're telling me is that you're managing production one way and doing a great job, which was illustrated by the graph you have in the lobby. But you are managing safety in a different way and doing a poor job. That is illustrated by the number of employees you have walking around with eight or nine fingers, and the number of workers you have sitting at home right now on worker's compensation. If you will manage safety and health the same way you manage production, you will see a similar improvement.

Not long afterward the auditor was back in that same plant installing the system described in this book. Less than 6 months later, injuries were down by 50% at this location.

Getting employees involved in the safety–health process is paramount to the success of worker safety and health management systems. Otherwise, workers view safety and health as someone else's responsibility and view the safety manager as the safety cop. When we get workers involved in safety and health activities, we increase their awareness. It is this increased awareness that leads

to fewer injuries and illnesses in the workplace. This is how we build a safety culture, and until we have this culture, employees, supervisors, and managers will continue to violate rules pertaining to safety and health as they view safety and health as someone else's responsibility.

Employee involvement can be achieved by issuing safety and health assignments and giving employees and supervisors something to do to get actively involved in the EHS effort. There are several advantages in doing this, which will be discussed in detail in the chapters that follow.

Suffice it to say that when we achieve employee involvement and increased participation, we will reduce workplace injuries and illnesses, get closer to achieving OSHA compliance, reduce costs, and establish a safety culture.

After all, someone's safety is a personal matter, and it is the personal responsibility of the worker to do the job right, including doing the job safely. Many times managers view the workforce more as an institution than as a group of individuals. Employees are not buildings or machines. The workforce is not a book club with unidentifiable members scattered around the country whose only existence is by way of a number in a computer; they are humans with feelings and needs and families. It is very easy to lose sight of this fact and inadvertently become callus to the needs of the workforce, including their needs for protection on the job. But workplace safety and preventing injuries is a personal matter; thus it is important to view safety and health on a personal level.

A manager at a small plant of ~200 employees who was accompanying a safety consultant on a plant safety inspection was told that he could cut employee injuries in half within 4–6 months using the "facility safety and health management system." His immediate response was "What's the cost?"; not "Tell me more" or "That sounds interesting" but "What's the cost?" He was given a quote and quickly balked, saying that he just couldn't justify that kind of expense. He proudly pointed out that the facility had only five recordable injuries the year before and only one of them was serious—an amputated finger; at which point the consultant asked the manager to look around at his employees on the floor busily going about their duties, and pick out the five he wanted to get hurt this year.

The perspective changes somewhat when put on a personal level. Naturally, the plant manager wouldn't want a single employee to have an injury, especially an amputated finger. But this manager

was willing to accept injuries as a part of doing business rather than to make a small investment to put a stop to them. Would he be any more concerned if his own finger or one of his children's fingers were amputated?

Even in those facilities where the plant manager can and does go onto the plant floor and greet workers by name on a daily basis, if management does not recognize the need to manage safety and health like other matters, then injuries are regretful, but still accepted as a part of doing business.

Injuries and illnesses should not be accepted as a part of doing business any more than production shortfalls or budget overruns are accepted. Such things are not acceptable and will not be tolerated.