

A Creative Approach to Safety

Adapted from a presentation by Geoffrey Gioja, JMJ Associates
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Creating and sustaining safety in the workplace is a common goal for companies, although one that few accomplish. It is possible, though, so why does this goal elude so many companies? One issue is that of the status quo repeating itself—the relationship and response to safety is typically one of reaction-prevention instead of proactive-prevention. Until the cycle is reversed, companies will continue the unnecessary and frustrating struggle for a safer working environment.

“Prevention often turns out to be reaction in disguise.”

Geoffrey Gioja
JMJ Associates

Safety management has evolved over the years from one of no formal relationships, procedures or processes around safety, to a reaction-based mode to the current reaction-prevention based model. The first change was provoked by the 1940s passage of the Worker Compensation Act, which for the first time held companies financially liable for injuries on the job. As a result, companies became more proactive and safety performance improved.

Nearly 30 years later, the OSHA Act—an industry-wide management focus on compliance—was enacted provoking a new wave of reaction. While the 1950s saw an awakening of a desire to focus on at-risk behavior instead of just the hazardous conditions, the OSHA Act and the ensuing compliance focus pushed that approach aside until later. However, the changes already underway in the United States were positive, influencing and adding momentum to promoting a clear focus on preventing workplace injuries.

Many of the workplace changes that have since transpired, including systems that are characterized as proactive, are usually more preventative in nature. These are positive changes—steps in the right direction that should not be minimized. However, there is more work to be done. There is need for a genuine reaction and commitment to an injury-free workplace.

History tends to repeat itself at organizations: react, prevent; react, prevent. Examining the daily management of safety reveals that on good days, prevention prevails, but on bad days, reaction takes over. Our best managers will often shift to prevention mode even when things go wrong. Even so, much of the efforts to prevent incidents are based on a desire to avoid the consequences of those incidents. In fact, employees and supervisors are most often more concerned about preventing the organizational consequences of a first-aid injury, for example, than they are about preventing a first-aid incident itself. A colleague once said, “Prevention often turns out to be reaction in disguise.”

The next step to a system of safety management is goal-oriented, based on these ideals:

- A shared commitment to the complete elimination of workplace injury
- Authentic leadership engagement in the safety effort

Next organizations can focus on:

- Transforming safety from a priority to a values-based mind set
- Developing a culture of genuine concern about safety, rather than the company's rules and compliance
- Creating an environment in which the individual's intrinsic values are respected, instead of being regarded primarily for their instrumental value

A Shared Commitment to the Elimination of Injury

While most companies we encounter are committed to safety, relatively few are committed to *eliminating* injury in the workplace. Many companies do, in fact, espouse a zero-injury focus. However, when questioned, the overwhelming majority of individuals in those organizations do not truly believe this is a viable goal. “Eliminating Injury” in these cases is merely the company code for “doing the best we can”, which fosters a demotivated environment in which people think they are working toward something that they do not actually believe is attainable. The company's safety culture and performance are then compromised by what it says is possible verses what it actually believes is possible.

When commitment is established, there can be no doubt in the minds of managers, supervisors and workers that safety is not—and never will be—a numbers game. Without this clearly spoken and widely believed commitment, people will not have a place to stand upon to bridge the gap between reaction and prevention.

Authentic Leadership Engagement

A shared goal, across the company, to the elimination of injury is a necessary step to enterprise transformation. Traditional safety environments stifle workers from expressing concerns and voicing what's "not popular" for fear of retaliation. It is vital to create a culture in which people are encouraged to speak openly and honestly, rather than fear being punished. The commitment to this culture must permeate the entire organization—both old and new employees. Once established, the safety vision, commitment, and process require nurturing. Even the most powerfully spoken, thoroughly integrated, genuine commitments naturally devolve toward a "check the box" approach when not monitored. It is the responsibility of each level of the organization to regularly re-engage people in the safety initiative.

Once these conditions are established (and then consistently renewed), management can focus on the issues and opportunities, which will not be in short supply. It is important for management and employees to collaborate on ways to support each other in meeting the challenges that accompany any truly creative undertaking.

From a Priority to a Value

Safety as a value is a simple statement, but one that is not always as easily executed as one would assume. Safety as a value and #1 priority is a common goal of many managers; however, it can lead to difficulties because it requires transforming the behavior and beliefs of leadership, individual employees and the general culture. A typical view by hourly employees is that production (schedules, productivity and cost) are the real priorities. Leadership must change this perception by consistently treating safety as a value—a value that places human safety above production.

The way in which managers speak about their commitment to safety must align with their actions. Disregard for this challenge undermines even the most sincere effort. Management's task is to ensure that the safety culture has transformed, and continually reinforce open communication and authentic relationships. To be effective, management must quickly bring to the surface perceptions that are a barrier to realizing the commitment to eliminate injury and greet employee's views and opinions with an open ear. They must be eager to manage and change the environment.

One of the tests of whether safety is sincerely held as a value is management's approach (toward attitude) about off-the-job injury. If leadership is seen as being unconcerned or less than genuine in their speaking about safety off the job, they will be perceived as less than sincere about their professed concern for safety on the job. Safety is a value not a strategy.

Judgment and Choice vs. Compliance

In an injury-free environment, management must be willing to recognize compliance-based safety processes and procedures, while stretching their thinking and beliefs beyond the rules. While we will not take the time here to delve into the limits of compliance as a basis for safety management, suffice it to say that it is necessary and should be enforced, but it does not guarantee sound judgment and choice. Compliance does not require that people be safe—it merely requires that they give the appearance of being safe. Being "legally safe" is a poor and potentially dangerous substitute for transforming a culture into one that embraces and believes in safety.

Respecting People for Their Intrinsic Value

Treating people with genuine respect and concern is one of the most effective ways to help create an injury-free environment. Low morale, feelings of disrespect and loss of dignity, and 'quality of life' issues are all indicators of discontented workers, which can lead to careless work habits. An environment in which individuals are seen primarily in terms of their instrumental worth, such as their value as a worker instead of their value as a human being, does not elicit the safest, most productive work. An environment in which morale is high, and employees feel dignified and respected, enjoy a high 'quality of life' at work, and feel recognized primarily for their intrinsic worth, will elicit the maximum contribution and capacity from employees.

Recommendation

When companies experience enterprise transformation, extraordinary results happen. Through our work we see employees harness their intrinsic value in service of eliminating injury on their job. When management and employees consistently take the high road and create environments in which people know they are valued and cared about, they are more likely to give more to their work, by working harder, better and more safely.

The moment the culture transforms into a values-based environment instead of a strategy, real and lasting change can occur. Breakthrough results are not produced simply by going after the results, but by doing the right things.