

Safety Culture

By Jeff Mather, CSP



Obvious but hidden fallacies:

“It’s hard to see the forest through the trees”. It’s an interesting paradigm when you consider the extent to which we focus our energy on putting out fires and addressing the immediate problems of the day. If you allow yourself to step outside the chaos of the “day-to-day” and view your workers’ compensation program with a more objective eye, you may be surprised by what you see. In many organizations *an ounce of prevention* hasn’t kept up with inflation, and *a pound of cure* has become a five hundred pound gorilla!

I recently attended an annual workers’ compensation conference. There were a multitude of vendors, insurers, TPA’s, claims people, attorneys, doctors - the whole gang was there. There was even a select group of actual clients - the people who use the services of all these talented people. There was not, however, much representation from the safety profession. In fact, I was somewhat of a curiosity to many of the people I met. It seems that safety isn’t viewed to be in the mainstream of the workers’ compensation industry. Surprise!

Forgotten basics:

It’s easy to get caught up in the frills and sophistication of our industry. We have created a well funded and compelling perspective of how we are suppose to control the cost of workers’ compensation – or so we’re told. The infrastructure that has been built to “protect” the employer from the costs associated with the injured worker is impressive to say the least. The *system* of legal and medical interventions, post injury, is well established and ingrained in the minds of most people who work in our business.

At the same time, the industry investment in accident prevention has caught a downward spiral that, in many cases, concedes defeat to exposures that will result in ongoing injuries. As a nation, we spend billions each and every year managing the process of making injured or ill employees whole again. As workers’ compensation professionals and business leaders, we seem to have forgotten that loss prevention and safety diligence has been, and always will be the single most effective and important tool we have for controlling these costs.

It wasn’t too long ago when the Quality function in manufacturing experienced a similar crisis. It was devastating to many industries but resulted in a revolution in quality assurance. Who can forget the failures of the 1970’s and the success of Japanese imports. As is often the case with innovation, failure seemed to be a necessary step along the path to greater success. Today, the process of continuous improvement is viewed by many economists and business leaders as the key to leading and managing a successful operation – of any kind. Change, innovation, and improvement are the only constituents of the status quo that can be found in most successful organizations today.

If *crisis* seems too strong a word for the status of Safety in workers’ compensation, consider the role of your company’s “safety person”. If they’re like most, environmental compliance consumes more than half their time. Post injury claims issues, litigation and return-to-work eats up another chunk. While a case can be made for the relationship between OSHA regulatory compliance and injury prevention, most of the agency’s standards are laden with time consuming and ineffective rules requiring performance oriented policies and procedures. Staying current with these mandates is the bane of the profession. Safety initiatives targeting workplace culture and the behavioral issues that underlie most injury/illness trends, are largely non-existent.

Workers’ compensation prevention:

At the end of the day a huge mistake has been made. It’s one that we perpetuate because we haven’t fully comprehended the failure that it

represents. Safety, like quality, is not one person's job. Like continuous improvement, it's a process of change and innovation where the entire team, company, or industry takes responsibility for the incremental improvements that are necessary for excellence and success.

In the workers' compensation industry (client and service provider alike) we have failed to promote and use safety to do the job that it was intended to do. Instead, we use it as an ancillary service, outside of the mainstream workers' compensation system...and discretionary for many work practices. To a large extent, we have allowed safety to become an optional commodity that is used "as needed" to put out fires, or ensure compliance.

At the same time, our industries appetite for the services of the medical and legal professions rivals that of our society in general. As a result, our industry has created a culture of workers' compensation *management* rather than workers' compensation *prevention* - and the loss cycle continues.

While it has become somewhat of a slogan in recent years, a *safety culture* isn't an easy thing to accomplish. It has an entrenched system working against it and a mountain of bureaucracy to overcome. Making a paradigm shift in your organization will require a maverick to champion the cause, and a person of vision to see the forest through the trees. Maybe you're that person!

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