

## SAFETY MANAGEMENT

# WORKER Psychology AND SAFETY Attitudes

By F. RICHARD KELLEY



Since the beginning of the industrial revolution, a constant, yet needless, conflict has existed between production and safety. For many years, production was considered a company's only legitimate "heir." Safety was considered an orphan (or, at best, a step-child). An article from a Pueblo, CO newspaper, "Miner Remembers the Value of Mules," reflects the prevailing attitude of that era.

*At the time of the 1913-1914 strike, miners were paid less than \$3 per day for about 10 hours labor in the mines. Those were the days when a mule was more important to the company than a miner. Dante Bonacci, 86, worked in the mines in those days, and that's one of the things he remembers most.*

*"You know," he says, "a man would get killed, and they would take the man out and leave the tools in. The next day somebody else would use his tools. They would just bury him. His family didn't get a penny. But if you killed a mule, they fired you because they had to buy a new mule and that cost money. When there was an accident, the first thing they would ask was, 'Any mules killed?' Then they would ask if any men were killed. If a mule was killed, they would have to buy a new one for \$24. If a man was killed, the next day they would get another one for free."*

These company executives were not evil or malicious people. They simply

considered safety only in monetary terms—as it affected performance and cost. Often, the only safety instruction was, "Be careful!"

### THE WORLD IS CHANGING

It was once thought that close control over workers was the best way to prevent accidents and improve production. Although this approach may work with children, it will not work with today's workforce. This generation is more intelligent than any before it—and knowledge is doubling every 10 years.

Behavioral scientists suggest that employees are more committed if they have a voice in setting work goals and controlling safety. People want to contribute to the accomplishment of worthwhile objectives. They want to be part of a mission and enterprise that transcends their individual tasks. They seek purposes and principles that lift, inspire, empower and encourage them to be their best. People want to be managed by principles, not by endless rules and regulations.

In the face of these demands, more companies are moving toward employee empowerment and self-directed work units in the decision-making process. Their primary focus has become employee behavior and attitude change. Not only does this improve safety performance, it also provides positive impetus to production and quality.

Companies can no longer view employees as little more than "muscle and brawn." They must acknowledge that employees *can* perform the job provided they receive proper training. Too often, managers have a dim view of their employees' capabilities. Studies indicate that less than 20 percent manage as if their subordinates were competent; they expect the worst and manage accordingly.

As a result, managerial vision needs to be sharpened. The problems of poor productivity and inadequate safety are likely of management's own making—it aimed too low and expected too little.

What if management worked from the basis that people are competent and able to perform safely and productively? This is not an idle question. Much evidence suggests that people perform as they are expected to perform. This synergy between expectations and performance is strong, and it has far-reaching effects in both safety and production.

### PEOPLE: THE MOST IMPORTANT ASSET

Some 20 years ago, 2,500 company executives were asked to rank 12 needs of their companies according to perceived importance. Of these items, five dealt with human factors: labor relations, pride, morale, safety and job satisfaction. These were rated 4th, 6th, 8th, 10th and 12th, respectively. Cost, production and quality outranked them all (1st, 2nd and 3rd,

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future; attitude and behavior modification are its key. People are the only true means through which to create wealth. How well employees are educated, trained and treated is more important than the actual work process or product.

Consider, for example, that Japan has seven times fewer accidents than the U.S. Simply put, the primary reason for this high level of safety is Japan's business culture—the climate that permeates all business activities. According to Joji Arai, past director of the Japan Productivity Center in Washington, DC, "The only abundant natural resource Japan has is people." U.S. Secretary of Labor Robert Reich states, "Japan and Europe have essentially the same technology [as] the U.S. . . . What makes a difference in those societies is the way in which they capitalize on their human resources."

In a recent *Time* article, a GM executive acknowledged that "Japan's secret of success is not advanced technology or low wages or some mystical work ethic. Japan's most important advantage is the way they deal with their employees." In other words, Japanese companies consider employees their most important asset—and their actions support this belief.

People should be the key asset of any organization with an eye on the future. Valuing employees, and providing them with appropriate training, should be an attractive investment for any company. Each company must ask: "Are we properly investing in our employees?"

## PARADIGM SHIFT AND CULTURE CHANGE

Although this approach is easy to understand, it takes time to apply. It requires a paradigm shift and a change in culture. What is culture? In simple terms, it is "the way it is around here, the way we do things; what we allow, permit and tolerate; how we deal with each other and solve problems." Why is Japan's accident rate low? Because of the way Japanese companies do things! Culture dictates how firms operate. To succeed into the next century, the business community must adopt a similar approach.

Culture is an outgrowth of attitudes and behavior. It dictates how employees act and how they are treated. It demonstrates company and employee values, and determines whether a job will be performed safely. Culture also influences business functions—be it safety, production, quality or scheduling.

Can culture be changed to become a progressive, positive force with clear-cut values? Absolutely. But it must be a company-wide goal.

An early step in this process is known as "buy in." How are employees convinced to "buy in" to a company? How is ownership ("this is my company, my product, my workplace") fostered? What prompts an employee to say, "I am responsible for safety. I am accountable. I will make this work"? In short, how is personal involvement fostered and the "It's-not-my-job-I-don't-want-to-get-involved" syndrome eliminated?

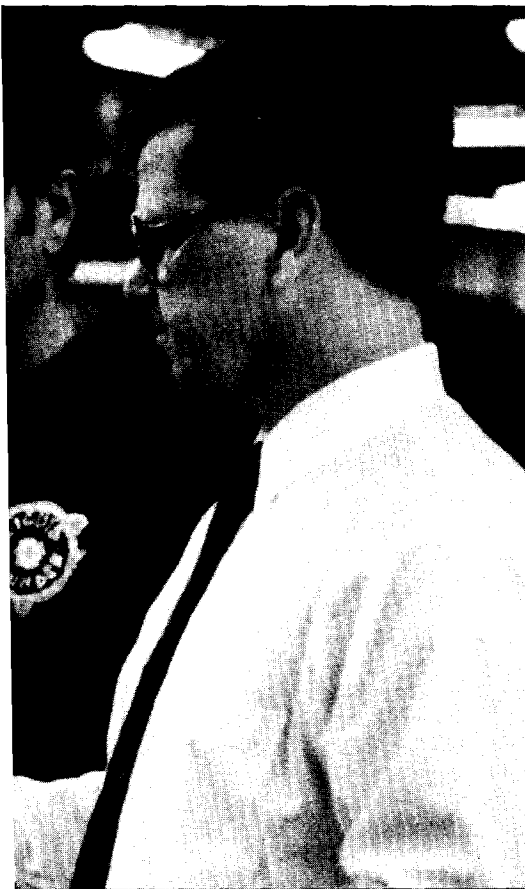
To answer these questions, several obstacles must be overcome. These obstacles involve the way employees view four key words: commitment, participation, involvement and visibility.

## THE FOUR KEYS TO CULTURE IMPROVEMENT

The personal philosophy of the top executive cascades down through an organization and impacts all functions. Therefore, an organization's philosophy—including its commitment to loss control and accident reduction—is a projection of the CEO's personal values, beliefs and ideals as understood and applied by middle management. How middle management translates this philosophy into practice is the most difficult factor to ensure. As one airline executive said, "The most difficult job I have in making this company a success is pushing the concepts of safety and service down to the last person."

Figure 1 illustrates this difficulty—showing that upper management's visibility, participation and involvement in safety leaves something to be desired. Notice how management's philosophy loses impact as it cascades downward. To alleviate this problem, the top-level manager should be visible (at least occasionally) at the grass-roots level—in the workplace acting safely or participating in a safety meeting. Such actions send the right message and reflect personal commitment and involvement.

When not involved in the safety process, top managers feel frustrated and ineffective because their message is not understood. In turn, middle-level managers feel powerless because they are receiving "mixed messages": cut costs and downsize, yet meet production goals. As a result, safety is slighted or merely given lip-service. Consequently, employ-



respectively). If such a survey were taken today, the results would likely be similar.

## TIME FOR A NEW APPROACH

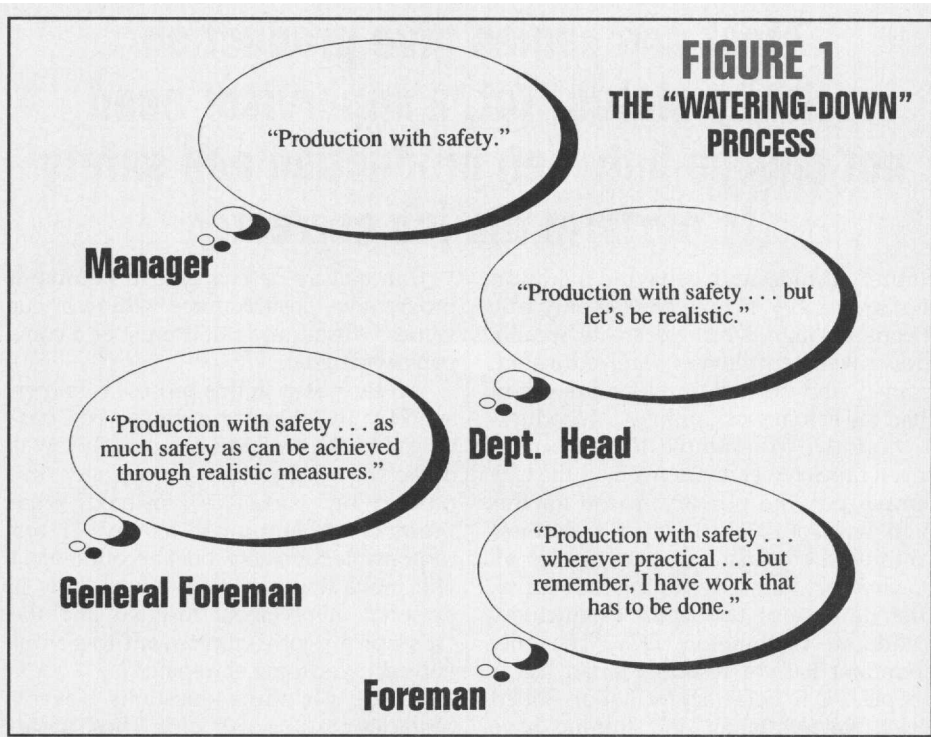
A new approach that blends safety attitudes and behavior patterns with production and profit realities is needed. Because priorities always change, this approach must stress safety as a *human value* rather than as a priority.

If safety is considered a human value, tasks will always be performed safely—regardless of production priorities. Values outrank priorities (in terms of influence). Without this shift in philosophy, a conflict will always exist between safety and production. Safety and production are highly compatible, not polar opposites. Good management need not require a choice between one or the other.

The new approach should stress the human element ("people factor") of production, which is highly influenced by attitudes and behavior. Consider this Deming concept:

*The aim of a company is for everyone to work together, like an orchestra. The players are not there to play solos . . . they are there to support each other . . . . A business is not merely an organization chart, all departments striving for individual goals. It is a network of people and materials, methods and equipment all working in support of each other for the common aim.*

This "people focus" is the door to the



can also exist in "good" programs, such as when nothing is done to alter hazardous conditions.

#### BEHAVIOR AND SITUATIONAL RISK

Strengthening safety values is accomplished by bringing attitudes into alignment with responsible behavior. Figure 2 illustrates the constant interchange between performance and risk. Note that the line depicting behavior is not straight (everyone has ups and downs). Behavior must harmonize with risk in order to avoid accidents. This variance in performance levels is what causes failure in meeting job demands.

Although situational risk and system demands are reasonably easy to bring under control, the same cannot be said for human input of error, failure and other factors. Therefore, accidents are a failure to cope with either the environment or situational risk. They represent a behavior-versus-risk problem impacted by personal attitudes, habits and prevailing culture.

#### ATTITUDES THAT DRIVE BEHAVIOR

A commonly held definition of attitude encompasses mind set and perspective. Yet, this is only a partial definition. Attitude also involves the proper response to this mind set. The way an individual looks at things (attitude) drives behavior and performance. Several drivers are listed here with reference to their ability to impact actions. Attitudes, whether good or bad, are contagious—they are caught, not taught. They develop over time and are impacted by life itself.

1) *Apathy*. Traits: does not care, passive, not alert. Such an attitude has a detrimental effect on co-workers and can infect an entire organization. Apathetic people merely want to finish the job, collect their pay and go home.

2) *Complacency*. Traits: satisfied, content, comfortable. This occurs when the job is going smoothly or when things are taken lightly. Employees may sometimes drop their guard and become vulnerable to inherent risks.

ees feel undervalued and unappreciated. No one asks for their opinion and the gulf between "them and us" grows.

The keys to closing this gap are involvement and participation. Each person within the organization must be visible in the safety process and empowered to do what is needed. This promotes a feeling of self-worth and value. Employees then have a sense of belonging and feel important. Subsequently, safety achieves value status. Safety values (like other values) must be based on a mutually accepted set of principles that, in effect, govern all actions.

#### SAFETY: MANAGED, MISMANAGED OR UNMANAGED

"Whatever management permits, management condones." This is one of the truest statements about worker psychology and safety attitudes. It means all levels of supervision must realize that whatever they instruct, authorize or allow workers to do becomes management's expressed safety-will. The timing of these instructions means little. If an unsafe procedure is authorized—regardless of particular circumstances or "justification"—it has management's sanction. Consequently, it becomes the accepted way. This is the ultimate case of leadership by example.

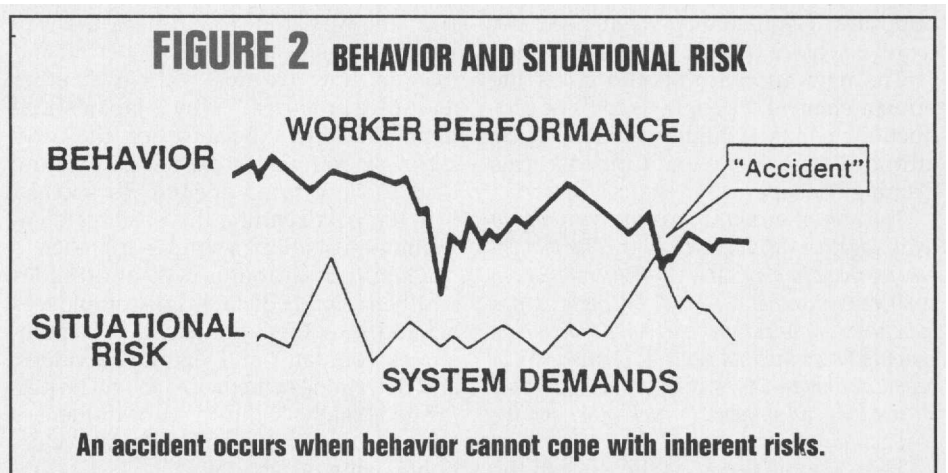
Unfortunately, the wrong message has then been sent. Safety has been left out of the loop. The most basic part of safety—values—has been sacrificed, a point employees will quickly notice.

At this critical juncture, safety is no longer being properly managed; it is being actively mismanaged. Safety has been sacrificed in favor of production. If no negative consequences result, the

belief that the safety procedure was unnecessary is strengthened. After all, everyone reasons, nobody was hurt.

Mismanagement does not mean, "No one cares whether people were hurt." Instead, it means the company's value system has collapsed under the ever-present priority of production. Most companies give production priority status (and likely always will). Yet, a supervisor need not choose between production and safety in order to perform the job correctly. The supervisor must opt to execute the job the right way—which is *always* the safe, productive way.

In some situations, however, safety is an unmanaged function, one without active direction. This "hands-off," *laissez-faire* approach is common in many small companies, which are often guided by the principle embodied in impunity: "It can't happen to us." This, too, tells employees that no one cares and that safety is merely luck. Such an approach



3) *Hostility*. Traits: getting mad or angry, argumentative, sullen. Peripheral vision narrows due to anger, and people become victims of "unseen" hazards that may actually be in plain view. Anger prevents clear thinking.

4) *Impatience*. Traits: hasty, hurried, anxious, tense. Impatience causes people to act as they might not otherwise. It also promotes a chance-taking mentality.

5) *Impulsiveness*. Trait: spontaneous. This also falls into the chance-taking category. It spawns a "shoot (act) first, ask questions later" mentality.

6) *Impunity*. Traits: expect no penalty, consequence, punishment. The chance-taker's creed is, "It can't happen to me."

7) *Invulnerability*. Traits: Superman-complex, feel bullet-proof. This attitude is common among risk takers. Invulnerability, of course, is an illusion.

8) *Negligence*. Traits: lax, remiss, not prudent. This involves doing the wrong thing—either intentional or unintentional. Negligence is the basis of many lawsuits.

9) *Over confidence*. Traits: brash, cocky. Chance-takers take short cuts—and often get away with it. This attitude is common among people who know their jobs well.

10) *Rebelliousness*. Traits: defiant, disobedient, breaks rules. Such individuals are hostile and difficult to work with. They think the company "owes them."

11) *Recklessness*. Traits: irresponsible, untrustworthy, unreliable, self-centered. People with this attitude do not think things through and often take a "devil-may-care" approach.

12) *No ownership*. Trait: take no personal stake in anything. This trait is the opposite of accountability. It is the greatest attitude problem and is pandemic in some companies.

To change behavior, these attitudes must be modified via training and education. Neglecting attitudes in behavior training is like ignoring peeling paint when repainting a house. The new paint will look good initially, but eventually the old condition will show through.

Similarly, unless attitudes are changed via training and through safety examples set by leadership, employees will soon revert to old behaviors. Permanently changing these patterns requires a "paradigm shift" (or a change in safety culture). In this shift, each person can (and does) impact the organization's personality and its culture. After all, at its base, a company is the composite of its employees' attitudes, habits, mores, personalities and interactions.

### THE CHALLENGE OF MORALE BUILDING

Studies indicate that companies with low employee turnover and high morale are those most successful in communicating company goals and policies. When employees feel they are not shar-

ing in company goals, morale drops, turnover increases and their sense of belonging is lost.

Managers who keep few "secrets" from their employees, are honest and communicate well usually nurture excellent morale. In turn, this strengthens safety values and fosters a productive spirit among employees. It demonstrates that the company has an active values system, which includes the management of safety.

Low morale is a sure sign of deteriorating human relations. It lurks behind strikes, work slowdowns, absenteeism, turnover, low production, grievances and accidents. Building good morale is one of the greatest challenges supervisors face. It can make or break a company. High morale is the hallmark of a well-managed organization and is indicative of a strong safety culture. When morale is high, values intensify and accidents diminish.

### STRENGTHENING EMPLOYEE VALUES

Strengthening employee safety values requires an awareness approach to positive attitudes and behavior modification. It is accomplished by providing employees with skills needed to manage themselves and others in order to maintain consistent safety performance. This has grown more important in today's workplace, as more people are working without direct supervision. They must learn to *not* take chances (such as speeding up a job) just because no one is watching. This can be achieved by incorporating culture change, attitude modification and behavior training into existing safety programs.

Consistency in safety (and production) can be promoted via:

- **Safety awareness:** Learning new levels of observation for safety, and how to identify and heed early warning signs. Employees should learn to always be performing a safety audit, watching for and correcting hazards.

- **Modifying risk behavior:** Heightened awareness of attitudes, beliefs and values leads to behavioral change. This produces consistent safety performance and improves production.

- **Safety and the thinking process:** Learning to manage automatic responses, as well as managing attitudes for the appropriate behavior. This involves planning "escape routes" and emergency safety contingencies to counter hazards.

- **Personal responsibility:** Increasing the level of "ownership" or personal responsibility for safety. Employees "buy into" a program, making it their own. This process intensifies the concept of being accountable for one's actions.

- **Leadership role:** Provides essential skills for use on the job, thus enabling others to manage risk in a constructive manner. The crux of leadership is acceptance

of responsibility. This is especially true in the field of safety management.

- **Personal commitment and values:** People must be reminded constantly what is at stake for self, family, co-workers and the company, and how to make choices for the good of all. Setting a good example in the workplace is an incentive for fellow workers.

### CONCLUSIONS

1) Since safety is a people-intensive endeavor, "people-handling" skills must be improved.

2) Employees imitate management's attitude (or what they perceive that attitude to be). Therefore, supervisors set the safety tone and standard.

3) Many attitudes are contagious. They drive performance and are a key determinant of culture. Attitudes also reflect personal values.

4) Whatever management permits, management condones. This gives employees license to act right/wrong, safely/unsafely.

5) Safety flows downhill. Actions speak louder than words. ■

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