Safety Expressions We Used to Say
By Rob Loose

Recently I had a conversation with an elderly man at a church gathering in which he affectionately referred to his wife as a dame. *Dame:* That’s not a word often heard these days except in old *Popeye* cartoon reruns. Here’s another old saying: My wife’s grandmother described a pain she recently suffered as *hurting like the dickens.* I’ve heard that expression many times before, but on that occasion I wondered, what in the world is *dickens* anyway? Charles Dickens perhaps? What does the legendary author have to do with pain? Remember Wally in *Leave It to Beaver.* He used to use the word *swell* to describe things as being good. Doesn’t swell mean the same thing as swollen? Anyway, I digress.

Though baffling and bizarre as these old sayings may be, we can’t ignore the fact that these sayings once held meaning and were commonly used forms of expression. I feel the same way about these old expressions when I speak with my friends in industry who proudly tell me their business has gone so many number of days without an incident. Why in the Sam Hill (who or where is Sam Hill?) is it swell to count the days that nobody gets hurt? Here’s my two cents (thoughts) about that.

The truth is, I understand why people brag about nobody getting hurt or not experiencing any accidents for a length of time. However, this so-called metric is quickly becoming a nostalgic achievement to current-day safety professionals that doesn’t really mean safety is achieved. When someone tells me their plant has gone 300 days without an accident, I often wonder if I’m just getting an earful of nonsense and there’s really more to the story.

A few years ago, I visited a plant where one of my employees was struck by a another employee who was driving a forklift. The struck employee was injured badly and I wanted to see the scene of the collision. To be clear, the pedestrian in this incident was an MAU employee and the person driving the forklift was employed by my client. As I entered the facility I noticed a sign on the wall boasting 197 safe days. I wondered, Didn’t this pedestrian/forklift incident just happen yesterday? Are they still counting safe days despite the fact that a forklift hit a pedestrian? I quickly learned they were.

I asked the warehouse manager why they were still counting safe days despite the incident, and he smiled and said, “Oh yeah, our guy didn’t get hurt.” To make matters worse, the same manager asked me a few days later to contribute to the firm’s safety celebration for achieving 200 safe days. I didn’t contribute, if you’re wondering.

There were so many things wrong with this situation but I want to focus on the idea that this plant used safe days as a metric and attached a celebration for achieving the milestone. All the while, the plant really didn’t achieve 200 safe days. Management chose to ignore a visible injury that took place at its site because its employee didn’t get injured in the incident. Yet paramedics carried a person out of the facility on a stretcher and drove away in an ambulance.

I wonder how many other incidents occurred in which “their guy” didn’t get hurt or how many near hits/misses the site experienced in which it got lucky. How many people stuck a bloody hand in a pocket to hide an injury because they didn’t want to prevent the 200-safe-days party? What kind of message did the plant employees receive at the celebration when, just 4 days prior, a forklift seriously injured someone in the plant? I venture to say (why would you “venture” to say anything? Just say it!) some in the room were confused and thought the steak dinner they were served tasted quite processed. Hogwash (another confusing, old expression meaning who knows what!)

Ever hear the saying, “The road to hell is paved with good intentions?” Employer safety metrics and incentive programs are typically designed with good intentions. OSHA is paying close attention to employer safety incentive programs and cracking down on employers that still practice them in a way which employees may be encouraged to not report injuries. I’ve often seen jet skis, boats and even automobiles in plant lobbies that enticed employees to not get hurt because after a year without an injury they may be the lucky winner of the big prize. These programs get on OSHA’s last nerve (last nerve? I didn’t know nerves were ordered). OSHA views this type of scenario as a disincentive to report an injury and possible whistleblower retaliation if injured employees are disqualified from employer safety programs as a result of a workplace accident. A memorandum written by OSHA Deputy Assistant Secretary Richard Fairfax on March 12, 2012, says as much (www.osha.gov/as/opa/whistleblowermemo.html).

I say that a safety incentive program based entirely on achieving safe days or a certain OSHA injury illness rate falls knee-high to a grasshopper (meaning short) and may not properly motivate employees to be safe.

If you’re reading this and thinking this stuff is all a bunch of hullabaloo, you may need to rethink your idea of what truly is safety success. What safety metrics do you pay attention to monthly? What safety achievement triggers your organization to celebrate? Are you focused on lagging indicators of safety and what happened that you no longer control? Or are you focused on leading indicators and things you do that create/control safety?

If you’re more focused on lagging, consider revising your program to reward employees for completing safety audits or participating in safety activities or for coming up with an idea that makes everyone safer. I bet you dollars to donuts (a strange expression, but I do like donuts) a revision to your metrics/incentive program toward leading indicators will make a big difference. It’ll be a real dandy (what’s a dandy? Dandelion is a weed). So what are you waiting for? Get a move on and shake a leg (hurry up)! Make safety happen and focus on leading indicators of safety. Its 2012, time to get the right program that really encourages safety.

Good luck and remember, never look a gift horse in the mouth. Whatever that means.

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