Is Firing an Effective Safety Tool?
By Allan T. Goldberg

I attended a presentation by a senior safety manager who had many years of experience. He was extolling his company’s successful trends and claimed that several initiatives had contributed to the results. One case study he presented sounded all too familiar, but the outcome was a bit troubling, and it made me think about a common practice in a different light.

He described a situation at an aggregate mining operation in a cold climate where a near-miss incident happened that could have been a lot worse. Three men were working to remove a drain hose from a partially frozen retention pond. Part of the hose was stuck, so one man rode the bucket of a backhoe down to hack at the stuck hose with a shovel, while another pulled at the hose. The man riding the bucket fell into the pond, but fortunately was rescued by the other two men.

Obviously, many indefensibly hazardous acts and conditions in this situation could have led to bad results: the first man could have drowned or died of hypothermia, and the other men could have been injured as well. The safety manager closed the case study mentioning that the three men, who had 20, 15 and 12 years’ experience with the company, were all fired. Few in the audience seemed to doubt that this was a well-deserved result. But, I wondered.

I recalled two companies for which I had done consulting work whose practices and policies carried similar overtones, and these had led to serious questions about the true safety impacts. One involved a large trucking company. It had a policy requiring that any driver involved in an avoidable accident be fired. As a result, a driver with 20 years’ experience was fired after a collision at an intersection.

The other example involved a large manufacturing concern in which two senior electricians had been burned in an arc flashover incident. There was substantial evidence that they were not following an existing standard procedure at the time, but equally substantial evidence that they had done the same job the same way for years, and with the full knowledge of their supervisor. Nonetheless, they both lost their jobs following the incident although the supervisor did not.

I am not naïve enough to believe there is no such thing as a firing offense. Employees who willfully and deliberately refuse to follow standard practices, abuse drugs or alcohol at work, or commit other egregious acts must be fired at some point after consistent application of agreed on personnel policies. If not, they pose a danger to themselves and to others, and cannot be retained.

So-called common sense approaches to many of these situations actually do not improve safety; they do quite the opposite.

This reasoning is commonly accepted, even in strong union shops. For example, a paper plant had a piece of equipment with a quickly moving plate parallel to the floor that could not be guarded completely. The floor was painted red under the danger area, and plant policy was that if your feet touched the red paint (unless you personally had locked out the equipment) you were fired on the spot. The rule would be enforced with the same consequences to everyone from the plant manager on down. It had never been applied, as training and awareness made it an almost sacred trust.

I don’t question the accuracy of the widely held belief that firings in very egregious circumstances are warranted. What I do believe, however, is that so-called common sense approaches to many of these situations actually do not improve safety; they do quite the opposite. Let’s examine why and consider some alternative solutions.

Firing Experienced Employees Reduces Safety

Let’s look at these three situations. When one fires a driver who has had a 20-year clean record after his first avoidable accident, who replaces him? The odds of finding an equally experienced driver with as good a record are slim. The net result is that the company’s driver cadre is less safe, not safer. When electricians are fired for having an accident because they were following a nonstandard procedure that was at least tacitly approved by repeated supervisory inaction, what message is being sent to the workforce? Were they fired for violating the procedure? I would argue apparently not. They were fired because things went bad. Their supervisor knew how they did the job, and it had always been acceptable until it went bad. The real message here was “do whatever it takes to get the job done, just don’t get hurt.” How does that improve safety?

But how about the three men and the partially frozen pond? Surely that was so egregious that firing was warranted. There’s one problem. After the meeting, I asked the presenter what the standard procedure was that should have been followed to free the hose. He said there wasn’t one. Given that they were left to their own (admittedly poor) judgment, isn’t there a great deal of management and supervisory culpability? Did firing the three workers make the operation at that site safer? It’s almost impossible to know, but is unlikely.

Ignoring Root Causes

In all three of these cases, and probably countless others, we are looking at the obvious problem but completely ignoring the underlying issues that are the real sources of the problem. In these cases, the safety process assigned blame after the fact and fired some experienced employees. Is that really what an effective safety process is supposed to do? Surely there are some proven effective measures that the “fire them” approach did not address. It did not identify hazards before the fact. It did not evaluate risk. It did not implement controls. It did not identify...
the root causes of the problem(s) that led to the incidents. Most critically, it did nothing to change the work processes that led to the incidents. In other words, it did nothing to improve the companies’ safety performance. Actually, by undermining employee morale and diluting the experience levels, safety (and productivity) will be hurt, not helped. We need to do better. Fortunately, we can easily do that.

Applying Consistent Performance Standards

Each case I’ve described has something very important in common. Clearly defined and consistently applied performance standards were not present. In their absence, consistent outcomes could not and should not have been expected.

For example, the trucking company’s safety manager had no clear definition of what constituted an avoidable accident. If he couldn’t define it, how could the company expect the drivers to do so? More importantly, how could they be trained to ensure success? If the injured electricians were doing the job the “usual way” and their supervisor knew it, then that was the actual accepted standard at the facility, regardless of any written procedure to the contrary. What about the three men and the partially frozen pond? Riding the backhoe bucket was an amazingly bad idea, but given the climate guaranteeing frequent frozen conditions, why hadn’t anyone ever come up with a standard, safe process to accomplish the job? This likely wasn’t the first time a hose got stuck nor the first time workers had ridden the backhoe bucket.

The pattern is clear and points directly to the solution. Identify hazards, evaluate and assess risks, develop standards, implement them and monitor their use, revising as needed. What about the three men and the partially frozen pond? Riding the backhoe bucket was an amazingly bad idea, but given the climate guaranteeing frequent frozen conditions, why hadn’t anyone ever come up with a standard, safe process to accomplish the job? This likely wasn’t the first time a hose got stuck nor the first time workers had ridden the backhoe bucket.

Let’s change it and start doing things in a different but consistent manner to control the results. That is the essence of a safety management system based on hazard identification and risk assessment. Eliminate hazards where able and control most of the others through effective safety programs. I say “most” in a deliberate way. Some hazards represent too small a risk to be controlled cost effectively and can thus be tolerated. Other hazards should be transferred by means of contracting or insurance. One must deal with all hazards (including those identified as needing no remediation) or remain exposed to sudden surprises. Regular reevaluation is needed to ensure that one is keeping up with workplace changes and resulting changes to risk levels. In working this equation, blame is not a factor. One must have solid processes before s/he can accurately evaluate employee performance.

When employees do not meet performance standards, do not be too quick to exercise the firing option. Ensure that something in the management system, as revealed by a root-cause analysis of why things went wrong, wasn’t the problem. If it was, one can fire as many employees as s/he wants and still fail to improve safety performance. And that is the key.

What Improves Safety Performance?

An action that improves safety performance is good for the company and for every employee. An action based on blame alone will seldom accomplish that goal. Whatever it’s called, firing employees to improve safety cannot be considered an effective or realistic approach unless safety risk management systems have been strongly applied. So-called common sense approaches are seldom anywhere near as effective as we want them to be. Firing should almost always be the last option. Effective safety processes must always be the first. Don’t get them reversed!