Small business has been called the backbone of our economy. Large corporations depend on small business to provide them with parts and services that keep them in business. The outcome of our economic recovery may rest on the ability of individuals to create jobs in the small business sector. If you look at the statistics survival rate, safety programs for small business are abysmal. The state of their safety programs may be why so many smaller businesses fail. State after state tracks the safety records of small business vs. large business, and in all cases, the injury rates are far higher in the small business sector. Small business is an area rarely seen by safety people. Most safety professionals have never worked for or with a small business. The reason is the owners of these businesses feel they do not have the resources for mandated safety programs, and they fear the consequences of noncompliance.

Most small business owners want to have a safe workplace but do not know how nor do they feel that they have the time or resources to develop a legal and comprehensive safety program. They know that they can contact OSHA for assistance, but they fear the consequences of having a state regulator in their shop. Most have been told that their insurance company may have resources to assist them, but they fear that their insurance rates may go up after the “insurance guy” inspects their business. Most business owners know that professional safety consultants can help them, but the owners feel they cannot afford to hire a consultant and do not have the time or resources to follow up on the consultant’s recommendations. In most cases, business owners do not recognize the safety hazards in the work environment and in fact feel that a good safety program is in place, right up until something happens.

All three of these situations are partially true and partially untrue. For the small business owner, the biggest issue is compliance. When faced with a compliance issue, the business owner feels that compliance is not possible. The business owner can hire or promote an existing employee to be a safety person. If the business owner does not have the available resources but understands that a safety program is needed, s/he can try to do it alone. This never works. The business owner will not be held accountable for completing a safety task properly as daily business needs will take precedent over safety activities.

As safety professionals, you can see fallacies behind these solutions, but can the business owner see the realities? Before we can find solutions for small business, we must recognize the limitations that exist within small business. We must be able to balance the need with the available resources. With the small profit margins of small business, proper allocation of resources is needed. Effective safety programs need not be totally OSHA-legal.

Emphasis must be placed on the word “effective.” How do you explain a workplace without a single accident that has no written safety program? How do you explain a business that has a compliant written safety program but has a bad safety history? We have heard it before; it is called management control. Senior management controls the workplace, either by effective written programs or through fear and respect by employees. Either way, there is accountability. The key to the small business dilemma is accountability.

If you ask business owners if their supervisors are responsible for safety, they will normally say yes, but...
if you ask if their evaluations of supervisors include safety responsibilities, the answer will be no. The supervisor is held accountable for production and quality control but not for safety. If supervisors see a safety issue but no one is injured and the product is produced, they will normally not say anything. Eventually, the unsafe act becomes a part of the work environment and becomes an accepted practice. Maybe something will happen, maybe not. As I have explained to owners, you pay a supervisor to monitor the workplace and safety. This is part of the supervisor’s responsibility, but without any type of reinforcement from management, either positive or negative, there will be no follow-through. Safety is not where the emphasis is placed by leadership until something happens. Then the fingers start pointing and problems, as well as corrective measures, rest with the employee. Management does not know how to use accident investigation as a safety tool. They make the assumption that they are unable to keep employees from making mistakes.

Training may be considered an issue here, but training can be limited and is typically the least effective means for correcting workplace safety issues. Have you ever wondered about the injury rate within the first 6 months of employment? Many assume that it is due to fraud, and some early claims probably are fraud. Say a new employee is hired and trained to do his job and is placed on his own. In his desire to do a good job by increasing his productivity or maybe just to push through a tedious task, he starts to cut corners. There is no follow-up training to correct bad habits. Then, the injury happens—is it employee error or failure in management?

Most small businesses tend to have daily one-on-one contact with employee supervisors. In a small business, this one-on-one contact can have a far greater effect on employees than to sit down once a month and lecture to them about job safety. It becomes tedious for the employer and a good time for doughnuts and coffee on the boss for employees. Why? They have heard it so many times before. One-on-one gives employees a better relationship with their employer in a small business.

The written safety program rarely exists in a small business, and if it does, the owner or the supervisor rarely knows what it contains. If they have one, it is a program that was downloaded from a computer or given to them by a consultant. The program sits on a shelf and gathers dust. Small employers need to have sweat equity in their programs. They need to understand why a rule is in place and to what benefit it is to them. They need to think it is their idea as it pertains to their business. Most of all, they need to know the cost benefit to their business.

Is OSHA relevant to small business? Yes, small business needs the guidance as well as the fear of the law. The fear of detection or apprehension is what keeps most of us honest. If you do not believe that comment, all you need to do is look at highway speed limits and ask yourself why people do or do not comply with them. More than fear, businesses need the guidance and understanding of the safety community to help them determine excess regulation vs. needed regulation. They need to know what is at risk when there is an occurrence. They need to see regulations as roadmaps to loss prevention.

Given this information, they would need to decide what their safety program will be and how it will function. Once a safety culture has been established and the company grows, so will the safety program. As the business grows, the safety program will also expand to meet the growing needs of span of control. The safety community needs to address this problem. How? Understand the problem and market to it. Write articles, go to community organizations, talk to them, speak to them in the words of their industry and volunteer your time. This is an opportunity for the safety community to help the business community.

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