Managing Change & Stress

Change and stress can be major causes of incidents. This article presents some effective strategies to improve SH&E and personal performance in stable or turbulent times.

In lectures and workshops, the author asks people their thoughts about the word change. Most say they tend to think negative thoughts ranging from “Will I lose my job, my seniority or my security?” to “Will this result in more work for me?” to “This is not fair.”

The impact of change on most employees, whether they be medical or ancillary staff, line employees or managers, is typically negative, as is its effect on SH&E performance. Results include increased rushing, worry, frustration, resentment, stress and distraction. These lead to lower productivity and an increased possibility of incidents, injuries and health/environmental challenges.

Most people resist change rather than welcome it. We fear that we will lose something. Although a situation may have negative aspects, we become comfortable with what we are used to. We resist change because we do not like it, do not want it, do not agree with it, do not know what the future will bring and what will happen, are afraid of it or do not know how to deal with it.

When change results in new yet unknown leadership, downsizing, upsizing or reorganizing and the loss of or change in a job, those affected often resist change because it leads to increased responsibilities. Others who survived any reorganization often feel guilty that they survived and others lost out. Their guilt and remorse add more stress. However, some may see change as an opportunity to advance. How they handle change depends on perspective, self-image and a belief in their ability to handle it constructively.

Often, what underlies resistance is the belief that if we resist something enough, it will disappear or change. However, this usually does not happen. Rather, resistance creates tension, doubt or uncertainty, resentment and fear, and more stress. Resistance also is a distracting factor. When distractions occur, so can incidents.

Sources of stress can include downsizing, upsizing, restructuring, incentives, the future, job security, work conditions and environment, pressures to increase service or productivity, heavy patient responsibilities, quotas, legal issues, internal and external competition, personality conflicts and personal issues and concerns related to organizational or outside issues.

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Resulting challenges for the safety professional and other safety, medical and nonmedical leaders and employees are many. Change and stress are major causes of incidents, both on and off the job.

Key questions to determine preventive strategies include:
1) What are people afraid of?
2) What supports a fear culture?
3) Are people afraid to bring up unsafe/unhealthy conditions?
4) Are people afraid to report incidents?
5) How does fear affect SH&E culture?
6) How does fear affect service and delivery?

Responses to these questions can help leaders eliminate the kinds of reactions that can increase stress and distractions, cause people to lose focus and open the door to incidents. Clear, concise and accurate information can help stabilize the atmosphere, although people may not like the outcomes. Effective change management requires frequent communication.

Some effects of change, fear and stress are fatigue and lowered response time, loss of focus and attention, tight and tense muscles and conscious choices to take shortcuts or bypass procedures.

Research conducted by Richard Lazarus, Ph.D., shows that stress relates to people’s cognitive appraisal of their perception of a threat of loss and their capability to cope with that threat or loss. Thus, stress results from what we tell ourselves about our reality or circumstances.
Do we accept that reality and believe we can handle our situations constructively or not?

A study by Kobasa and Maddi on why some people handle stress well while others do not focused on the question, when an event occurs, am I:

• challenged or threatened?
• alienated or involved?
• in or out of control?

According to Kobasa and Maddi, people who see new situations as threats, who are alienated or who are out of control have a 50% greater chance of getting sick.

People on the challenge end get involved, feel in control and tend to stay in better health.

If illness can be predicted by these attitudes, can incidents be predicted as well? The author asserts that poorly managed organizational changes increase the probability that people will feel threatened, alienated and out of control. This contributes to a greater possibility that incidents and negative health consequences will occur.

Today’s healthcare management and safety leadership need to be sensitive to these issues at all times but especially during times of organizational change. They need to look for early indicators of attitudes and behaviors that can lead to incidents:

• decline in job performance;
• sloppy work habits;
• poor housekeeping;
• irritable, quarrelsome behavior;
• frequent distractions;
• drug and alcohol use;
• uncooperative attitude;
• general negativity.

Even in growth periods, stress and distractions can be high, so incidents can occur. In a positive sense, stress can help people stay alert to danger or trouble, as well as generate the energy and strength to respond quickly to a stimulus or real threat. Goals and obstacles to overcome help us achieve.

Today, more than ever, effects of change and stress play a continuing role in causing errors and in SH&E performance. Attention and effective interventions are needed. Medical, nursing and safety professionals can encourage management to provide resources to assist all levels of personnel in learning to accept and deal constructively with change.

Ask yourself these questions:

1) Am I developing effective strategies to deal with change?
2) Am I allocating the time I need to deal with these issues?
3) Is management allocating the time I need?
4) If not, how can I obtain the needed support?

During times of change and heightened stress, managers and safety leaders need to be salespeople and change agents. They are in a key position to educate, guide and persuade key decision makers to take actions necessary to ensure the effective management of this time of uncertainty.
For effective change management and to minimize incidents, injuries and health/environmental challenges:

- Hire outplacement services when downsizing.
- Provide employee assistance program services for work and personal problems.
- Involve employees in identifying and solving unsafe and unworkable situations or conditions.
- Give people control and power to make SH&E improvement changes. (Ensure that the structure to approve and implement changes works. Also provide complete feedback on approval or disapproval of recommendations.)
- Provide leadership, management, coaching, counseling and interpersonal skill training.
- Ensure that incentive systems or quotas do not support stress and unsafe/unhealthy behaviors.
- Obtain upper management and corporate support and resources to improve unsafe, unhealthy or stressful situations.
- Have frequent communication meetings that relate to changes in the organization. Tell people the truth.
- Train incident investigation teams to handle incidents constructively.
- Provide holistic stress management skills to all employees that emphasize stress reduction and relaxation, physical fitness, nutrition, time management, self-observation and management, and assertiveness training.

Finally, take care of yourself so you can remain balanced and effective during difficult and stressful times.

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Get to Know ASSE’s Health & Wellness Branch

Although ASSE’s Health & Wellness Branch is sponsored by the Society’s Healthcare Practice Specialty, the branch focuses on health and its impact on safety, rather than healthcare. As Deborah Fell-Carlson writes in an informative article, “As safety professionals, we may not think about the fact that healthy, alert workers suffer fewer on-the-job injuries and recover more quickly when hurt. This can have significant impact on our workers’ compensation costs. Although it may be difficult to measure the impact, we know that managing wellness and injury together is a win-win.”

The branch is eager to guide other safety professionals to help shape worker attitudes, thinking and behaviors that may result in improved personal and global health and well-being. For more information on the branch and how to become involved, click here.

Safety 2014 Chapter Night Out

Are you attending Safety 2014 in Orlando, FL? Do not miss the Chapter Night Out on Tuesday, June 10 (7 p.m. to 11 p.m.) at WonderWorks. Sponsored by ASSE’s Central Florida Chapter, this event is a great way to meet other ASSE members and enjoy an entertaining evening as you explore exhibits throughout the upside down building that houses the indoor amusement park for the mind. The registration fee (adult $75; child, ages 4 to 12, $49.50) includes dinner buffet, dessert, unlimited soft drinks and the entire facility reserved exclusively for ASSE.