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 upon 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 highly 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. Sound familiar? It should because it is the most basic approach to a risk-based safety management system. Unfortunately, it was not effectively present at any of the companies whose incidents I described.

Instead, they waited for the hazards to find a weak point, blame and fire some employees, and hope for better results. What’s that saying about doing the same thing repeatedly and expecting different results?

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!
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 not to 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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