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## Serving the Specialist of the Safety, Health and Environmental (SH&E) Profession

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### **Using a Holistic, Integrated Approach to Changing Your Safety, Health & Environmental Culture**

By Michael Topf, MA

Internal and external safety professionals and consultants today often banter about what methodologies are most effective to improve safety, health and environmental (SH&E) culture and how to influence and change the unsafe attitudes and behaviors of the men and women who work there. Given the various theories and approaches implemented, along with assertions on which are most effective in producing short- and long-term results, many people are confused by the academic terms, phrases and claims that all these people use and make. What should we call it? Do we address attitudes first, or do we address behaviors first? Do we work with line employees, or do we work with management? Do we set up observation teams to give others feedback or to train our supervisors?

Getting caught up in which is the “right” approach or the “right” theory, method or terms can end up wasting time and energy and can create confusion. If the process improves your (SH&E) culture, addresses workplace hazards and system changes and changes the unsafe attitudes and behaviors of all levels of employees, it works!

In today’s changing world of business and industry comes downsizing, upsizing, right-sizing, re-engineering, restructuring and now the new term “leveling.” This presents challenges for the safety health and well-being of all levels of employees on and off the job. For safety, health and responsible treatment of the environment to become integral to your organizational culture during these and/or stable times, each of these elements must be viewed as essential to the productivity process. SH&E must be on par with quality, the production process, cost management, etc. Everyone must recognize their responsibility and accountability for the well-being of one another and the world in which we live. Critical to achieving this objective is management and labor leadership’s commitment to choose actions that will demonstrate a concern for the safety and health

of each person, employee or private citizen and the environment. Organizations' culture must be enhanced so that SH&E are viewed and demonstrated by all as key values and priorities.

Consciously or unconsciously, times of change can transfer time, energy, focus, attention and resources to other priorities. During "Lean Times," when survival issues come to the forefront and jobs and livelihoods are at stake, SH&E often gets pushed aside for those other priorities that mean dollars for the company.

Each industry has its own particular set of circumstances that can make it challenging to ensure that all employees behave in the safest manner possible. Most companies have permanent management, supervisory and line personnel, while temporary employee populations grow and change. Many of the older, highly trained and experienced employees are retired, and new employees or those with lesser experience have taken over their jobs and responsibilities. Training people in proper safeguards and practices when employment is temporary is difficult. Many companies do not consider it cost-effective to train temporary employees. With production pressures high on the priority list, having a "body" on the job may be the top issue, well-trained or not. Clearly, the cost of not investing in proper training and safety assurance must be measured against the cost of investing in this area. What measures can be taken to ensure that people do not hurt themselves and others regardless of the length of their employment? Can a dollar amount be placed on SH&E, long- or short-term, when it comes to human suffering?

The personal vision for all people is to be able to come to work and to go home in the same condition or better. To have all employees, customers and private citizens safe and in good health and to keep the environment clean is an objective behind which most people can align.

It is important to build a common SH&E culture where everyone involved can work together towards achieving their vision with objectives and goals that support it. To accomplish this, it is essential to identify any barriers to achieving the vision and to strategize to resolve or overcome these barriers. We encourage you to work with your management and line employees to create a vision for SH&E excellence and to identify the barriers that could prevent them from achieving this vision.

Even though people do not want to get hurt, they sometimes either deliberately or non-deliberately behave in an unsafe manner. These actions may result in an accident, injury or environmental incident. Positive or negative circumstances during times of change can be such a distracting influence that incident rates can rise.

The root causes of most unsafe behaviors and/or incidents result from either a loss of focus or attention or from counterproductive attitudes, beliefs and values, which influence the individual to place other priorities first. From past experience, individuals can also develop a false sense of security regarding their ability to control or to protect themselves as they carry out their work. Incidents or injuries can occur to an individual

as a result of their own awareness, attitudes and behaviors or the awareness, attitudes and behaviors of other people.

Conventional wisdom today asserts that most accidents and injuries result from unsafe acts. From our perspective, these acts or behaviors can result from one's own influences or from other management or line employees. Moreover, we have found that many SH&E incidents resulting from equipment failure could have been prevented if timely maintenance and repairs were initiated or if proper construction or installation had occurred in the first place.

Two types of events can occur. On one hand, individuals can easily become unconscious and unaware due to daydreaming, inattention, repetitive tasks, stress and distractions from a variety of sources. As mentioned, preoccupation with both positive and negative organizational changes such as upsizing, increased production priorities, downsizing, reengineering, job security, the future of the company, changes in product lines, etc. can cause a person to lose focus and get injured. The other factor involves conscious or premeditated behaviors, where in these instances, individuals will talk themselves into shortcuts, such as not following all procedures or avoiding wearing personal protective equipment. These premeditated unsafe behaviors tend to be supported by reasons, rationalizations and justifications and are often based on factors such as time, comfort and convenience.

When production schedules must be met, often where meeting contractual agreements with a customer or gaining a financial bonus or some other reward for achieving quotas are in play, overt and covert messages to complete work quickly can result in shortcuts and bypassed procedures. Foremen and supervisors may also overlook these unsafe actions, especially where their compensation is also affected. In companies where downsizing or fear of downsizing exists, employees have told us in interviews that they take shortcuts to get their job done faster because they do not want to be perceived as slow. "The slow ones will be the next to be laid off."

Frequently, our safety programs plateau and systems flounder or fail because the negative attitudes, beliefs and behaviors of those participating in the system sabotage its functioning. Programs and systems are abandoned because people do not contribute constructively or participate at all. Quite simply, systems do not work unless people do. Organizational habits and changes can promote attitudes and beliefs such as, "We cannot afford to spend the money or time on safety—we need to focus on production and profits." Traditional means of statistical tracking of accidents and injuries do not measure safety behaviors or ensure that all levels of employees behave safely and carry out the activities that will contribute to the prevention of accidents, injuries and environmental incidents. Low incident rates can cause people to become complacent and to place their attention and energies elsewhere. To ensure continual improvement, constant attention and energy must be applied to SH&E performance.

You can change behaviors by addressing attitudes, beliefs and the counterproductive circumstances surrounding people. This approach will support safe practices both on and off the job.

The leadership of the company looking to produce continual improvement in SH&E performance must identify and address the negative influences that shape the attitudes and behaviors of all levels of employees. The attitudes and behaviors of leadership must also reflect the awareness and understanding that SH&E focus and attention must be heightened at this time, not diminished. Essential resources for proper education, training, equipment and resolution of SH&E issues must be allocated. To diminish resources from this area to save money can be far costlier in the long run.

Defining and tirelessly communicating desired values and commitments can ingrain SH&E excellence as esteemed values. The attitudes and values of employees at all levels must be examined and measured against the vision for the organization. Expectations must be clarified where there is a lack of agreement. The most core expectation must be that each person exhibit responsibility for his or her own safety and health, the safety and health of co-workers, family, the company, the community and the environment.

To create breakthroughs in performance requires a holistic, integrated approach that emphasizes the importance of the whole and interdependence of the parts. In other words, all levels of employees, both management and line or labor, must be involved. Unsafe attitudes, beliefs and behaviors from any source can influence people in a way that causes incidents to occur. All employees must take responsibility for their own and others' behaviors, as well as system improvements, and be willing to intervene and to assist the person in behaving in a safe, healthy and environmentally sound manner.

The levels of your organization that must be addressed in your improvement process are:

- a. **Self-Management Level**—People must have skills to observe themselves and take personal responsibility to manage their own attitudes and behaviors on and off the job.
- b. **Peer/Team Support Level**—People must develop the attitude that they care and have a responsibility to encourage and support their co-workers to be safe. Skills are needed to do this constructively.
- c. **Leadership-Management, Supervision and Labor Level**—All levels of leadership must be able to put aside political and business issues to create and maintain a vision and environment where everyone can work safely regardless of external or internal circumstances.
- d. **Organizational Level** (including the culture, norms, values, beliefs, attitudes and commitments of the company and its employees)—SH&E must be held as an esteemed value, and the attitudes and behaviors that reflect this value must be encouraged, supported and acknowledged formally and informally.

Each level is underscored by responsibility and accountability. Total employee involvement is the most effective way to produce and to accelerate positive improvement in your SH&E process. Using the knowledge and experience of your employees to determine the best ways to improve and to ensure safe work practices is one of the best, low-cost investments of time and money that can pay off in preventing injuries and in keeping workers' compensation rates down.

When a person is internally motivated by the value and benefit of SH&E for themselves, their willingness to participate and to be involved in improvement efforts is greater, and resulting changes in behaviors tend to be long-lasting. External motivational strategies are most effective when in combination with internal motivation. Safety leaders (line and management) must be skilled in coaching and counseling techniques to constructively lead and interact with employees regarding issues, attitudes and behaviors. This also applies during times of organizational change. Leadership must continually convey the message that all employees must adhere to SH&E requirements and procedures for their own well-being and for the well-being of the company. Costs from injuries and incidents, including the sidelining of valuable team members, can financially push a company over the edge or seriously impair its' viability. Fines and other penalties from regulating agencies can also contribute to making a company "unhealthy." The cost of human suffering cannot be measured.

The process we have found most effective is to:

- a. Assess the culture and discover the prevailing attitudes, beliefs and thinking of all levels of employees that influence and shape safe or unsafe behaviors. (includes corporate and division leaders and influencers)
- b. Train all employees in self-observation and self-management skills. Skills to increase awareness levels, focus and pay attention, make safe choices resulting from safe attitudes, beliefs, and thinking, work as safety teams and willingly give and receive constructive feedback are some.
- c. Train all leadership, management, supervision and line/labor leadership in skills for effective leadership, coaching and counseling, communication, problem-solving, role modeling and other skills to lead, manage and support all employees in the SH&E process.
- d. Implement problem-solving processes and cross-functional teams to identify and solve SH&E issues and concerns.
- e. Implement a behavioral observation and feedback process to support the awareness, attitudes, thinking and behaviors that people have learned for SH&E excellence.
- f. Provide ongoing support and reinforcement. Every improvement process or program needs ongoing support to succeed. Ensure that necessary resources

(human, financial, equipment, etc.) are provided and are readily available to prevent breakdowns or failure.

- g. Acknowledge and appreciate contribution and success. Humanize your reporting of progress and/or incidents to demonstrate a concern for people, not just the numbers.

Continual SH&E improvement is an ongoing process, not a training program or an event. A culture shift represents permanent changes in the kinds of attitudes, values and thinking that influence desired behaviors from all levels of employees over an extended period of time. Optimum opportunities for breakthroughs in performance occur when corporate and line or site employees as well as other stakeholders reflect these values and beliefs in SH&E excellence. Accomplishing this shift requires consistent and sustained effort. A genuine value for SH&E will continue regardless of the internal and external circumstances.

Improving attitudes and behaviors around SH&E will result in improvements in attitudes and behaviors in all areas of productivity, including production, quality, costs, morale, creativity and innovation. Benefits and savings from an investment in these areas can be tremendous.

Increased awareness of one's own attitudes, beliefs, thinking and behaviors is the starting point to responsible actions that will correct personal and organizational behaviors and issues.

As was mentioned, some of the primary causes of accidents and injuries include inattention, daydreaming and distractions. These causes cannot be stopped completely, but they can be minimized through increased awareness. Awareness is the starting point. Specific skills and actions are then necessary to help maintain focus and control over ones' actions and interactions with their environment.

Behaviors are often difficult to change in ourselves and in others because of the human tendency to resist those things we do not like, disagree with, or find inconvenient. Our thinking process, attitudes and beliefs largely dictate our positive and negative behaviors.

Addressing behaviors alone without addressing these underlying attitudes and beliefs will not generally produce lasting behavior change. By increasing awareness through education, training and constructive intervention, individuals (both management and line) can discover their counterproductive attitudes and beliefs around SH&E and the possible negative consequences of their behaviors. When safety measures are disregarded by any level of employee and are overlooked by co-workers, unsafe behavior is implicitly condoned. Personnel may also develop a belief that other employees (line or management) do not care about their welfare when unsafe behaviors are overlooked, when resources are taken away or safety departments downsized when times are lean.

Common beliefs are: “It will not happen to me,” “I know it is risky, but I do not have time to do it safely” and “We cannot afford to spend the resources, money and people on safety at this time.” These and other individual and group attitudes and beliefs will shape safe and unsafe behaviors on and off the job.

Involving all levels of employees is another key feature in SH&E improvement. With trimmer staffs, everyone must see themselves as a safety leader. All personnel must be empowered to proactively find ways to identify and solve SH&E problems. Sometimes employees assume the posture of a “victim” around safety and safety improvement. They may blame the company for being too lax or, other individuals for being careless or the equipment as inadequate. Some employees are like spectators at a game and passively observe. They may comment on how the game should be played, but we find that they seldom take effective action to help others be safe. This often occurs because they may have had negative interactions in the past with co-workers or with line or management leadership. Many employees must be encouraged to participate and to learn how to be more effective in their interpersonal interactions. Systems and structures must be created to provide an opportunity for people to be involved, identify problems and solutions and receive feedback on progress. This is essential for continuous improvement. Effective communication between all levels of employees is key.

Lastly, your commitment and support is essential. SH&E leaders must be sales people and change agents. Be clear in your vision, be educated in all aspects of what you believe is necessary to improve performance and prevent incidents, do your homework and enroll all necessary persons from labor and management for the approval, ongoing support and success of your process.

## **Summary**

I. Almost all of the problems of modern SH&E processes can be placed into one of three categories. They are:

- Counterproductive attitudes, beliefs and behaviors (includes management and line personnel)
- Interpersonal and team ineffectiveness
- Lack of needed resources and/or systemic support

II. We have found that the process to create a breakthrough in SH&E performance and to meet objectives and goals is:

- Cultural Assessment—Discover current norms, values, attitudes, beliefs and commitments that influence or drive safe and unsafe behaviors.
- Train all employees to increase their awareness and to provide attitudes and skills to support and manage themselves and others to stay healthy, safe and to protect the environment.

- Train leadership-management and labor/line to evaluate, clarify expectations and guide employees in safe attitudes and behaviors.
- Provide ongoing reinforcement, resources, processes, systems and support for continual improvement.

III. Commitment is essential and ceaseless.

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