



SAFETY CULTURE - FOCUSING ON HABIT FORMING AND MINDFUL SAFETY APPROACHES

“Safety Habits... Our ability to acquire habits, whether good or bad, is directly related to our need for satisfaction. The importance of developing safe work habits, on the job, is that we avoid certain exposures even if we are not thinking about the particular hazard.”
(STS Solutions Feb 16, 2016)

As safety advocates, we spend countless hours on client consultation visits, inspections, preparing/giving training, holding safety committee meetings, and the list goes on and on. Unfortunately, much of the time it seems like our safety program keeps going round and round, in spite of all efforts we keep covering the same familiar territory of targeting similar injuries with our very familiar processes and hope that this time these efforts will take hold, resulting in safer workplaces and the ability to move on to the next safety need.

Traditionally, an organizations’ safety program consists of:

- Identifying/Eliminating the hazard(s).
- Setting injury prevention related policy(s).
- Training against the policy.
- Audit function.

These basic elements are straight forward and are implemented on a regular basis. The challenge in developing a safety program isn’t in creating/rolling-out the process, usually the reason that the process is being developed and rolled out is due to heightened awareness from a recent injury; therefore, it’s getting plenty of attention at the moment. The real challenge is in keeping the policy(s) and best practices thriving. In conversations with leadership, I’m asked why after so much effort, the injury frequency either has not improved, or in a few cases has even worsened. In attending safety and leadership meetings as well as conversations with staff, I have found that the most common denominator, in the lack of a program’s effectiveness, is in the organizations’ “putting out fires” culture: focusing on the immediate needs of running the organization, therefore what was urgent today is still important but overshadowed by the new “urgent” issue the following day. The question becomes; how can an organization continue to operate in the urgent present yet benefit from the important lessons of the past?

Outlined below are two best practices that can be implemented to ensure that a safety culture thrives when lessons learned transform into effective safety management.

Habit Forming

“Habits are behaviors that occur spontaneously without any preceding or concurrent thought process. The behavior occurs almost reflexively to external stimuli or events. For many, this is the ultimate goal of a behavior-based safety (BBS) process.” *(E.Scott Geller Jul 9, 2013)*

Behavior-based safety, in part, is a safety program that is based in observing, coaching, and rewarding behaviors that support the program to the point of habit. Habits, as noted above, are behaviors that become spontaneous with time and not thought about before performing the task. Therefore, the safety aspect of the task is automatically included in the overall task as well.

Based on years of experience in safety management as well as industrial maintenance, the best practices that have made it to the habit level are those that have been incorporated into daily processes and procedures that are required to keep staff safe such as proper handling practices and guidelines on when personal protective equipment is needed.

Many of us automatically adapt our own safety habits into our daily routines to keep us safer. When entering your automobile, do you think about buckling up or do you buckle up without thinking about it? Chances are you don't see it as a task; you just do it possibly due to the acceptance of the importance of vehicle safety, the legal aspects and in the repetition of buckling up over and over again.

Review your claims history and identify opportunities to revise policies and procedures to incorporate safety habits as often as possible. It is important to be “habitual” in repetitive tasks such as office workstation, best safety practices or powered equipment operation like lawn equipment. However, there are tasks that require more specialized safety procedures that may require more specialized safety considerations. A better approach for those instances would be as noted below.

Mindful Fluency

“When we are mindful about our actions, we talk to ourselves in different ways. Before starting a job, we might give ourselves a mental reminder that certain safe behaviors are required. Then we might mentally review our actions while doing the work. Afterwards, we might look back and evaluate our actions.” *(E.Scott Geller)*

Some of the most utilized perceived causes of injuries are:

- I didn't see it coming...
- I was in a hurry...
- I forgot...

It's safe to say that these are not examples of mindful causes, but of mindless causes of injuries.

“Mindlessness is habitual, automatic, repetitive behavior generally brought on by multi-tasking. It can directly impact an individual's overall wellness, stress level, listening skills, injury risk and safety, and more.” *(Kris Corbett, Jul 15, 2019)*

A mindful approach is contrary and can prove to be very effective in preventing injuries.

Some keys to mindful living are:

- Slow down - rushing causes mistakes
- Focus - produces high quality/safe work
- Engage the senses - paying attention to the details of what can be heard, seen, felt, tasted, or smelled is a tool for switching the autopilot off.
- Body Mindfulness - is being aware of signals the body is communicating, exploring the origin, and taking action to address the causes.
- Meditation - meditation is simply practicing the skill of allowing thoughts to enter and exit the mind without attaching judgment or reactions.

By considering the tasks to be performed and the related safety elements, whether repetitive and/or unique and complicated, we can apply either a habit and/or mindful approach. Developing a robust safety culture that incorporates these two approaches will provide us with a more purposeful approach, resulting in strong safety culture, fewer injuries and more predictable outcomes.