

# Valuing, Empowering Employees Vital To Quality Health & Safety Management

*TQM drives out fear, eliminates barriers and encourages cooperation to achieve mutual goals*



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*Dr. Donald Milar*

The theory and methods of TQM can be taught and learned. What must come from within is a willingness to change and an innate appreciation for our most valuable resource -the American worker. Without these requisites, TQM and prevention become superficial exercises without lasting effect.

Simplicity is often profound. A modern day author, Robert Fulghum, in "All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten," shares his conviction that wisdom is not "at the top of graduate school mountain, but

there in the sandpile at Sunday School." What Mr. Fulghum and the rest of us learned in kindergarten could, if practiced, have significant implications in the nation's workplaces.

Imagine a workplace where everyone complied with these guidelines: "Share everything, play fair, don't hit people, put things back where you found them, clean up your own mess, don't take things that aren't yours, say you're sorry when you hurt somebody ...live a balanced life -learn some and think some... and play and work every day some. .. and... when you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together ....."

TQM brings fundamentals of this sort into the boardroom and the rest of an organization. Respect for people, empowering each individual, continuous improvement, the quest for knowledge and balance, and teamwork -all of these principles are essential in the "quality" philosophy. Dr. Deming himself emphasizes the need to "drive out fear," "break down barriers," and "preserve the power of intrinsic motivation, dignity, cooperation, curiosity, joy in learning, that people are born with."

If we, as a nation, can spread the principle of respect for people and their safety and health and assist businesses who want to practice this principle, neither "prevention" nor "quality" can fail. Enlightened management and empowered workers are our best hope for achieving "safe and healthful working conditions" as required in the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970.

Research continues to show that focusing on "quality management" brings increased productivity and improved safety and health. One company that changed its management approach during the last decade, Phelps Dodge's Morenci Copper Mine, has tripled its production of copper per employee and has reduced the number of injuries from 14 per million employee hours to two.

**Managerial and organizational factors can have a dramatic effect on safety and health. A Miami consulting firm completed a study during the**

**T**otal Quality Management -As a safety and health professional, you have heard these words many times.

In recent months, the teachings of Dr. W. Edwards Deming as variously manifested in "TQM," "CQI," "TQL," "Emanicipation Capitalism," and other systems have gained popularity throughout the business community.

The goal of continuous improvement through managing by fact, statistical process control, focusing on customers and empowering workers is the subject of conferences, trade publications and popular magazines. Probably, these concepts have already influenced your board room. Dr. Deming and other management experts say implementation of these concepts is essential to American business' survival.

As an advocate for working Americans' safety and health for the past 12 years as Director of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), I am encouraged by all this attention to "quality." Implementing the philosophy of "quality"

requires the practice of "prevention" -the bottom line of occupational safety and health. Thus, the quality movement can be a profoundly significant enabler of workplace safety and health.

The philosophy of TQM and the "gospel of prevention" flow from the same philosophical source. The cornerstone of both doctrines is the fundamental belief in the inestimable value of human beings. TQM sees the worker as "our greatest resource"

-which is the best possible rationale for occupational disease and injury prevention.

Do not think, however, that "quality" is either simplistic or easy to implement. On the contrary, based on personal experience leading NIOSH as we embarked upon "quality transformation," I would assert the opposite. It is hard work, requiring complex thought (what Deming terms "profound knowledge") and persistence in the face of resistance to change.

**By J. Donald Millar, MD, DTPH**

last decade which confirmed this influence. Hank Sarkis, the firm's president, analyzed injury data and corresponding organizational factors and identified the leading organizational factors affecting safety. The most significant variables included the presence or absence of workplace stress, the degree to which the organization hires and promotes people who feel comfortable with their jobs, find their roles clear, are satisfied with the job and would recommend it to others.

And what of the "traditional factors" considered in safety programs? The level of safety training, for example, did not emerge as a key determinant. In fact, it was 37th on the list of variables. The most important factors relate to how companies treat people.

In response to the survey results, one company introduced quality programs to encourage teamwork and communication and gave employees more autonomy in making decisions about their work and safety. As a result, the company experienced a 76

percent reduction in the number of lost-time cases due to injuries and almost a 90 percent reduction in the number of lost work days.

It appears predictable that as "empowerment" spreads, so will progress in prevention. The time has come to humanize the workplace, to build trust, to drive out fear and to preserve our most valuable resource -workers.

Many years ago, before quality initiatives became fashionable, a former presidential nominee summarized his guiding principles. Adlai Stevenson said, "If I were to attempt to put my political philosophy tonight into a single phrase, it would be this: Trust the people. Trust their good sense, their decency, their fortitude, their faith. Trust them with the facts. Trust them with great decisions. And fix as our guiding star the passions to create a society where people can fulfill their own best selves....."

Building trust and respect is not easy nor inevitable. As Dr. Deming says, "learning is not compulsory." The simple values on which TQM

rests will be difficult to implement for success will depend on a complete transformation of organizational cultures. Yet, if we truly believe in our workers' value, we must instill in this nation the "passion to create a society" which values its people.

*Dr. J. Donald Millar, formerly u.s. Assistant Surgeon General and Director of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), retired Aug. 1 and is now an independent consultant. A physician trained in epidemiology, he began his federal career with the Centers for Disease Control in 1961. Among his many awards is the Surgeon General's Medallion for exceptional skill and fortitude in the management of program initiatives in the U.S. Public Health Service, 1992, and the 1990/1991 William S. Knudsen Award for outstanding contributions to occupational medicine, the most prestigious award granted by the American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine.*