

Health, Safety and Environment

Measuring What Counts

By Chip Dawson

Do you know your OSHA incidence rate? Sure you do! It's how most organizations measure their success (or failure) at safety. Too bad it's worthless.

Yep. You read that right. Unless you employ thousands of people or injure a high percentage of your workers each year, the incidence rate is a lousy way to determine how you're managing safety.

Here's why. It's all about statistics. To be meaningful, a statistic must be based on large numbers. If you are a large employer, you've got the necessary number of data points. If you're a small employer, but injure more than half of them, that's significant. But the vast majority of you reading this don't fit those categories.

For example, if you have 200 people on your payroll and you allow injury to eight of them (with four losing time) during the year, you're average - right on the mark for the mid-point of private sector employers nationwide. So, with eight data points over the year, you've decided your doing OK with safety. But, you don't make production or quality or sales decisions on eight annual data point. You more than likely gather data on those questions many times a day in order to have an accurate assessment of success or failure.

There is no question that every injury or work-related illness is a safety system failure - and a serious issue for the person who got hurt. But, an injury is a trailing indicator. To manage a process - any process - you need leading indicators to tell you when you're on the right track. If you have relatively few injuries, you can be off the track for quite a while before you know it.

If you're an incidence rate tracker, it's time for leading indicators - measures that count. Hank Sarkis, head of the Reliability Group, offers some suggestions. For starters, he

cautions that there is no "standard" list and your indicators may change with success. That said, his research has found that the following elements have a direct correlation to success at safety:



- Near misses - incidents in which something went wrong, but there was no serious consequence.
- Work group autonomy - the more people manage their own efforts, the safer they are.
- Stress levels - lower is better.
- Equipment inspections - safe behavior can't trump poor conditions.
- Cheerfulness - look at the best organizations and you'll find happy people.
- Job satisfaction.

You can measure these factors either directly, or through survey instruments, and you can create other measures that show how your safety process is moving forward. But most importantly, measure what counts.