

# Fight the Safety Naysayers

*Here's how to overcome resistance to your safety program.*

By Shane Tritsch

Three years ago, Rome Cable Corp. resembled many companies when it came to loss control. Management tended to view safety as a cost it had to bear, a mandatory nod to federal regulations.

Throughout the organization, safety was treated as a nuisance, someone else's responsibility -the safety administrator's or management's or line workers' or supervisors' -depending on who was passing the buck. Rome Cable's accident rate was about twice the average for its industry; so it paid high insurance premiums and workers'-compensation costs.

What a difference a few years and a change in safety attitude can make. Last year the Rome, N. Y., cable manufacturer celebrated an accident rate that had dropped from twice the industry average to about half. Workers'-compensation costs and insurance premiums plummeted by nearly \$500,000 compared to the previous year. Other improvements abounded: better employee morale, lower absenteeism, fewer product defects.

Most impressively, these improvements cost the company nothing, according to safety administrator David Lyman, who helped

spearhead the organizational changes that tightened the ship.

## Sweet Smell of Safety Success

How did Lyman do it? He won the backkill of management by showing that safety was an investment and potential profit center rather than a financial hardship. He created a collaborative team atmosphere to get

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employees on his side.

"We had to change our culture, change our way of thinking, our work habits and attitudes," says Lyman. "We got people to stop pointing fingers at each other, and we empowered employees to take responsibility for their own safety. Once management saw compensation costs, accident rates and time away from work all drop, it was sold on the program."

The experience at Rome suggests that new safety initiatives need not succumb to resistance from any level of an organization. The safety professional who recognizes such resistance also can overcome it with the

combined tactics of persuasion and action.

"There is resistance to anything in safety, both from management and from the work force," says Jack Skidmore, corporate director of health and risk management for Ormet Corp. "When you make a change you have to be committed and prepared. Study how the job is

done and designed, and be prepared to prove everything you say."

## Win Over Management

To win support in today's lean, mean economy, you'll have to prove your safety-performance record in terms senior management can understand.

"Safety programs have been resisted because safety professionals haven't measured successes and failures in the way senior management looks at figures and interprets them," says Fred Rine, National Safety Council's assistant vice president, safety and health. "Talk with your company's decision-makers," he advises. "Ask top executives on what



terms they want to evaluate your safety performance: financial terms? productivity terms? hours of work between injuries?

"Whatever definitions you use, you'll have to find a way of reporting safety that blends with data from operations and finance. **If** a company measures every other part of what they do by one standard, they don't want information about the safety program that uses another measuring tool."

You're vulnerable to cutbacks if

you can't document results in tangible terms, Rine warns. "If you conduct worker-safety training on company time, if you have X number of safety meetings, and even if you believe employee morale has improved, senior management still wants to know what you've contributed to the operation's effectiveness. In dollars. And you'd better be able to tell them." That approach requires a new attitude for safety professionals, Rine says.

You're going to have to show re

turn on investment for all your activities, he warns. "You'll have to prioritize your time differently. You can't spend all your time on safety inspections and accident investigation if you want to be on management's first team."

Instead, he says, safety professionals must sharpen their skills. They have to be able to market their successes, improve their selling skills within the organization and be able to make presentations using cost/ benefit, quantifiable data.

They may have had the data, Rine says, but traditionally, safety professionals haven't always presented their information in measurable ways that senior management can understand.

"If you can convince management that proactive safety saves dollars," he says, "your job is easier." For instance, suppose a company bypasses ergonomic factors or shortcuts machine guarding when it sets up an operations process. "It may have cost \$1,000 to design in safety up-front," Rine says. "But it may cost the company \$100,000 to pay for losses and injuries. Retrofitting is expensive.

"I don't think there's a CEO anywhere who's not going to support safety programs -if you have the data," Rine says. "But you've got to back up your pitch with hard data, not opinions. Health-care insurance, productivity, absenteeism, workers' compo -all go straight to the bottom line." The good news, he says, is that safety professionals are changing their attitudes. "They're becoming accountable. They're making safety a value-added service."

### Stepping Over Dollars to Get Nickels

Unfortunately, short-term logic

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sometimes persuades companies to try to do without safety professionals. "When times get tough, the safety director is often one of the first to go," says Larry Hansen, manager of loss-control services for Wausau Insurance Co. "It's driven by the propensity of managers to focus on short-term results from a cost standpoint. They don't consider the net long-term impact a year down the line; they have saved half a year's



At Rome Cable Corp., safety groups like this ergonomics committee help get employees involved in the company safety program. *Photo courtesy of Rome Cable Corp.*

salary, but they've taken their finger out of the dike. And little by little that crack in the dike keeps pouring losses into the organization. It's the stepping over dollars to pick up nickels approach to management."

Similar thinking prompts management to slash safety budgets or balk at new initiatives that could translate into safer, less costly operations. One safety professional tells of a large company that sustained \$50,000 in foot injuries each year.

New protective footwear would have eliminated the losses, but at a cost of \$90,000. Management nixed that proposal on the grounds that it couldn't justify the cost of the shoes.

If managers see safety purely as a cost, it's because they don't understand how lower accident rates and lower compensation costs can improve their financial situation. The safety shoes mentioned above would have paid for themselves in less than

two years just in reduced accident costs. That doesn't even consider lower insurance premiums, fewer lost workdays and esprit de corps that also would have resulted.

### Stretch the Safety Dollar

There are also ways to stretch the safety dollars that are being spent. William Reynolds, manager of safety for the City of St. Louis, works closely with his city's purchasing department to get the highest quality safety equipment at the best possible price. He also shops around for other bargains. "You can buy a good safety video for \$1,500," he says. "But you can get almost as good a video for \$99."

Reynolds has access to an in house department that can videotape jobs and produce safety videos of its own. And Reynolds constantly looks to the local safety council and other companies for cost-efficient safety ideas. "It's not providing a program on the cheap," he says. "It's just keeping limited budgets in mind and responding as creatively to them as you can."

A hefty budget may not even be necessary to improve a company's safety record, as Rome Cable demonstrated. Many accidents are a direct result of poor management,

which doesn't necessarily cost money to fix.

"If a company were to think out what causes accidents, they'll find system problems that could improve without a whole lot of expenditure," says Wausau's Hansen. "We're good at saying we want X number of widgets at 90-percent tolerance with 2-percent scrap. What we don't say in the process is that we expect this level of accidents. How can you expect people to give you a result if you never tell them what you want? It could be accidents per hour or payroll costs or whatever measure you choose. Once you say that this is the goal, you can start measuring, and people will start giving it to you. That doesn't cost anything. Good management is creating goals, measuring performance and rewarding for achieving goals."

#### How to Sell Employees on Safety

Back injuries at Ormet Corp. were costing the Hannibal, Ohio, company too much money. Health-and risk manager Jack Skidmore figured out that the injuries happened when workers bent over to take heavy parts out of a wagon used to transport them. The solution was to install a spring-loaded bottom that would keep the parts within easy reach as workers depleted the wagon's contents. Employees at first disapproved of this improvement. They thought, wrongly, that management would expect them to produce more product because the new contraption would make their job easier.

The story illustrates how natural antagonism between management and labor can potentially subvert even the best intentions. "People will find ways to make something not work unless you convince them it will," Skidmore says. Only after he convinced employees that the new bottom would make their jobs safer and more efficient, and was not a ploy to wring more work out of them, did they accept it. Now they suffer far fewer back injuries.

The story also illustrates how

winning the support of management only begins to solve the problem. It is equally essential to win the support of the rank and file. "A barrier of mistrust crops up between employees and what is viewed as a representative of management," says Bill Russell, safety and security coordinator for Armstrong World Industries Inc. But he adds that that kind of mistrust only becomes a problem when management rules by decree instead of consensus.

"In our team-based culture there is real resistance to being told what to do, even if it's a mandatory regulation," Russell says. "Overcoming that is a continuous effort. We let

among employees is plain old fear of change.

"People are creatures of habit," Russell says. "They like to do things a certain way." But his solution has a familiar ring. When making changes, he says, the savvy professional will seek feedback from everyone affected. "Sit down and discuss things and ask for their ideas. If it's the employees' idea, they will try harder to make it work."

The level of control employees have may be a key variable that decides how safe the workplace is, according to loss-prevention consultant Hank Sarkis, president of The Reliability Group. Sarkis says that

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employees take issues back to their teams and let the teams decide how to proceed. We tell people they have to take responsibility for safety themselves rather than have someone from above tell them what to do and how to do it.

"Folks are used to having a safety committee pass a rule and say this is what everyone has to do," he continues. "We're moving away from that toward individual responsibility, which works better because the employees are deciding what to do. It's easy to argue against what someone else tells you to do, but it's hard to argue against what you decide."

Russell echoes a theme of many other safety professionals -the key to overcoming employee resistance to safety initiatives is to seek their input involve them in the decision making and cede to them responsibility for the outcome. A safety manager for a tile manufacturer says the obstacle he finds most entrenched

job autonomy and four other key variables not traditionally thought of as part of safety play a major role in workplace safety.

The other variables are employee job satisfaction, cheerfulness of the workplace, near misses and equipment safety. Simply put, the less satisfied workers are and the less input and control they have, the more accidents they will suffer, Sarkis says.

Sarkis recommends other ways to get employees onto the side of safety:

- Allow workers more latitude in determining how best to do their jobs. "I'm not saying give them all the keys to the building, but allow them to decide who does what rather than their supervisor deciding," Sarkis says.
- Charge employees with responsibilities rather than tell them how to do a job.
- Seek feedback from employees, including evaluation of their supervisors. "This is a tough one to institute, but it makes supervisors ac-

countable to employees and turns them into facilitators rather than autocrats."

- Insist that workers report all near-misses; make the system anonymous so employees won't fear reprisals.
- Recognize achievement. After sailing through a quarter with no accidents, a wood-products company treated its workers to free pizza. "Recognition, not the amount of the award, causes positive action," Sarkis says. "You don't have to send them to Hawaii to make them work safely."
- Make the work place fun. Sarkis tells of a mill that hired a high-school marching band to parade through the plant at lunchtime after the firm achieved a production goal.

Most of these measures cost nothing, yet the payoff can be enormous. "What we've shown statistically is that as people are more satisfied with their jobs, they take fewer chances that can lead to mishaps," Sarkis says. "Safety people and first-line supervisors will say that things like workplace cheerfulness and job autonomy are not in their control. But they are. Workers will deliver what management wants. If you want a safe environment, you can have it. And it doesn't cost lots and lots of money."

Safety and job satisfaction at minimal cost. Who could resist that?

*Sources:* Bruce Austin, repair supervisor / safety director, Woodbury Telephone Co.; H. L. Boling, safety and hygiene supervisor Phelps Dodge Morenci Inc.; Daniel Della-Giustina, professor and chairperson of department of safety management, College of Mineral and Energy Resources, West Virginia University; Larry Hansen, manager of loss-control services, Wausau Insurance Co.; Aaron Hebert, corporate safety manager, Laitram Corp.; David W. Lyman, safety administrator and work-team trainer, Rome Cable Corp.; William Reynolds, manager of safety, City of St. Louis; Fred Rine, assistant vice president, safety & health, National Safety Council; Bill Russell, safety and security coordinator, Armstrong World Industries Inc.; Dick Sager, loss-prevention manager, FMCLithium Division; Hank Sarkis, president, The Reliability Group; EdScheinuk, vice president, Eustis Insurance Inc.; Jack Skidmore, corporate director, health and risk management, Ormet Corp.