

TRAINING TODAY

SAFETY PROBLEMS? TRY MANAGEMENT TRAINING

If your plant's safety record is far from sterling -and getting worse -what should you do? Offer safety training to everyone who works at the plant? Offer incentives to workers who avoid accidents? Offer training in team building for supervisors and managers?

Oddly enough, the third choice just might be your answer. According to Hank Sarkis, president of The Reliability Group, a Miami-based consulting company, safety training is not a key factor in workplace safety. Sarkis' research indicates that the variables with the most significant relationship to accidents are: workplace stress, the degree of cheerfulness of the workplace, employee selection practices, a rating of procedures along a naturalness/awkward dimension, the degree to which workers know what is expected of them, and job satisfaction. Among the 80 variables he has identified, safety training ranks 37th on the list.

Sarkis' study consisted of a 200-question employee survey that examined the organization, its work groups, the environment and workplace safety. What turned out to be one cornerstone to his research was a question asking employees how many "near misses" -close calls that didn't result in an accident -they had in the past three years. Near misses, Sarkis discovered, are considerably more common than most organizations realize. And if the causes of near misses are not addressed, accidents are likely to follow.

One case Sarkis analyzed involved a manufacturing company with two identical plants, Plant A and Plant B. They were owned by the same company, made the same products, were constructed at the same time and shared similar technology. The only difference was that 21 percent of Plants A's employees reported having an accident in the last three years, while Plant B had a 34 percent accident rate. Even after Plant B started a recognition program that rewarded employees who worked safely, the accident rate remained relatively constant.

So Sarkis started looking for differences between Plant A and Plant B for both accidents and near misses. One major difference that appeared was that employees at Plant B were more likely to receive a reprimand as a result of an accident. Consequently, only 72 percent of the accidents were reported. Things were even worse than Plant B's management thought.

When Sarkis began to examine the organizational culture of both plants, he found that supervisors at Plant A tended to be more achievement and team-oriented, and skilled in human relations. At Plant B, there was less teamwork and supervisors stressed conventional behavior: always follow orders, take no risks, don't rack the boat, and so on. Consequently, workers at Plant B were both less autonomous and more dependent than those at Plant A.

So what does this tell you about how to improve safety at your company?

Sarkis offers three suggestions. First, encourage supervisors to be more team-oriented by training them in leadership and facilitation skills. Next, start a program in which employees evaluate their supervisor's performance at least twice a year. Finally, increase the participation and accountability of employees on the front lines, the people who actually produce the product or service. In particular, involve lower-level operating employees in planning work procedures, hiring new employees and purchasing new equipment.

In short, the things that will make your company safer will also make it a better place to work

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