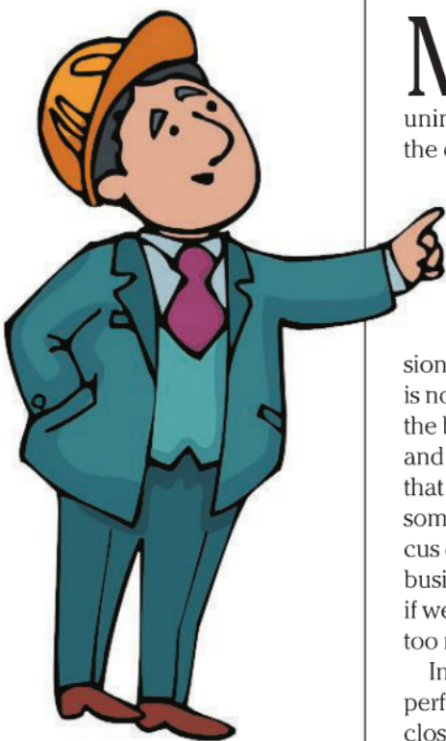


>> Uncle Bill, the Safety Guy

In organizations with excellent safety performance, the safety professional is a close family member who is a valued part of the mainstream goals and activities.



Don't be an "Uncle Bill" type of safety professional. Instead, be a valued advisor and incorporate safety into the organization's overall goals.

My Uncle Bill wasn't a close member of the family. He showed up on rare occasions, either invited or uninvited and inevitably tried to take over the occasion. He was a smart guy and it was hard to argue with him, but he wasn't "mainstream" in what the family really wanted to do and he always diverted attention away from the reason for the event to his own agenda.

In many organizations, the safety professional is much like my Uncle Bill. He or she is not really in tune with the main goals of the business but shows up often, both invited and not. They are smart and it is hard to deny that what they say is valid and important, but somehow it seems like a distraction from focus of the organization. After all, aren't we in business to make money, and can that happen if we ignore productivity and quality to pay too much attention to side issues like safety?

In organizations with excellent safety performance, the safety professional is like a close family member. He or she is a valued counselor and advisor, but never takes over the leadership role. Safety is an important aspect of everything the organization does, not a separate or competing activity.

In some ways, the differences in such organizations are slight and almost undetectable. Some refer to them as different paradigms or perceptions, but they are powerful differences. If it is true that all progress begins with thinking differently, let me suggest some important, new ways of thinking that have helped organizations achieve safety culture excellence:

Leadership of safety cannot be delegated – Yes, I know that leaders are busy folks and cannot do everything in safety themselves. But isn't that true of every other aspect of the business as well? That is why you have help in every aspect of the business.

That doesn't mean you quit leading production or quality or maintenance or logistics just because you have an expert in that aspect of the business to assist you. In safety, many leaders don't just delegate, they abdicate. These "leaders" act as though they are much too busy to deal directly with safety. Guess what message that sends to the work force about the priority or value of safety in the organization? The safety professional virtually can do all the busywork of safety, but he or she cannot lead. True leaders delegate tasks and projects and even management activities, but not leadership. When the leaders lead, the followers follow. That especially is true in safety.

View the employee as the client of safety, not the problem – Almost every mediocre safety program is focused on controlling or managing the workers, even to the point of "beating" them into compliance. The unspoken assumption is that the worker is the problem and if we can solve the problem, we will be good in safety.

Excellent safety programs are focused on selling safety to the workers. At first, it seems contradictory that intelligent workers would need to be sold on safety. They don't need to be sold on safety; they need to be sold on your organization's approach to safety. Workers don't want to get injured and they take steps to avoid it. Their experience and job-logic tell them that their approach makes sense.

When managers (especially the ones not often seen in the workplace) make new rules or start new programs, workers are skeptical of the practicality and value of such efforts. Well-designed safety efforts communicate the rationale of new efforts or even involve workers in designing new programs and processes to ensure buy-in and engagement from the outset. Organizations that view the

worker as the problem still tend to dictate without inclusion or explanation and thus continue to suffer from the ever-widening gap between their managers and the work force. Very few organizations are really good at marketing safety to their own work forces, but the ones that do reap outstanding benefits.

Safety is an aspect of production

— There is a prevailing view in the business world that safety and productivity are two sides of a coin. You can have one or the other, but not both. Such dichotomous thinking drives the wedge between safety and mainstream business thinking.

There really is such a thing as “safe production” and that goal does not necessitate ignoring one aspect to get the other. When we were focusing on quality, we realized that our old thinking of “units out the door” was defeated if the units came back due to poor quality. We didn’t design our production lines to produce defects. When we did so, we failed to produce and looked for a solution to the problem. Likewise, we didn’t design our production lines to injure workers, and when we do so, it is a production failure and must be fixed. Poor performing organizations sometimes try to justify their safety failures with production figures. In reality, production that also produces injuries is poor and costly production.

Good safety is good business —

The justification for safety should be a business reason, not just altruism. Certainly organizations should care about their workers and try to keep them from getting injured on the job, but the rationale for such efforts should not be just bleeding hearts nor simply dollars and cents.

If your leaders don’t realize the link between safety and productivity, they are missing the key to excellence in both areas. When a worker justifies taking a risk to keep the line running, he or she is not just risking an injury, but an event that seriously will impact production. Injuries almost inevitably shut down production and substitute less-qualified workers to take the place of injured workers when production starts back up. If you can’t sell workers on safety as a humanistic goal, sell them on safety as a tool of production.

The two are hopelessly interrelated.

If safety still is viewed as a subordinate goal or competing activity in your organization, changing this view is your next best opportunity to improve. Introducing these basic concepts of safety is a good starting place, but the ultimate goal is to lead and manage safety just like every other critical aspect of business. Welcome home, Uncle Bill.

EHS

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