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Are You Gambling with Safety?

How can you achieve good safety leadership?

By Judy Agnew, Aubrey Daniels • *Jan 01, 2011*

Despite decades of reduction in safety-related deaths and injuries on the job, catastrophic accidents appear to be on the rise. In the past 10 years, there have been at least nine industrial accidents that resulted in more than 125 deaths. Two accidents in 2010, the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico and the Upper Big Branch mining disaster in West Virginia, have not only caused injury and death; they have wreaked economic havoc on the communities in which they occurred and incalculable environmental impact, in the case of the gulf disaster.

Why are catastrophic accidents on the rise?

The Deepwater Horizon offshore oil rig operated for seven consecutive years without a single lost-time incident or major environmental event. By that measure they were safe. We now know that for those seven years they were, at least to some extent, "safe by accident." By all reports, many unsafe conditions and behaviors existed at all levels of the organization that had, through sheer luck, not resulted in an accident. On April 20, 2010, the luck ran out.

This pattern is not unique to the Deepwater Horizon case. Based on decades of research and work with many of the world's leading corporations, we've concluded that many companies are safe by accident because they focus too heavily on incident rate and don't take a scientific approach to managing safe and at-risk behavior. Sophisticated companies that use only the latest scientific information and technologies from chemistry, physics, engineering, and biology use so-called common sense, myth, and downright faulty information to manage the behavior of their employees.

Nurturing Good Safety Leadership

There is a better way. An in-depth knowledge of the science of behavior can enable leaders and safety professionals to build systems and management practices that create a lasting corporate-wide commitment to safety -- from the boardroom to supervisors to the front lines. Organizations that fail to take a scientific approach to safety's human-behavior element are gambling with their futures and are ultimately safe only by accident.

This is not intended to be an indictment of leaders, because the role of leaders in safety has been poorly defined. Vague phrases such as "making safety a priority" or "creating a safety culture" have little meaning. What should a leader do today and tomorrow to ensure a safe work environment?

After interacting with thousands of supervisors, managers, and executives, we have rarely met a leader who didn't care about safety. Lack of caring and concern about safety is not the problem. Leaders are adept at talking the talk: "Safety is the first priority," "Nothing is more important than safety!" Nevertheless, when we ask leaders about the activities they do each day regarding safety, we often hear general phrases such as "I make sure the employees know how important safety is" or "I emphasize safety all the time." When they do get more specific, we hear, "I remind them to wear their PPE" or "I talk about safety each day" or "I start every meeting with safety."

Two questions come to mind: Are these the right behaviors for leaders to engage in, and is it enough? Many leaders we work with have a nagging feeling the answer to both questions is no. Nevertheless, they aren't sure what more to do. How do you become an exemplary safety leader? What can a leader do to help create a culture that truly embraces safety?

Safety cultures must be carefully and deliberately nurtured. If not, they will develop inadvertently and, more often than not, they will drift toward poor safety habits. Ineffective safety cultures can develop despite good intentions. In our experience, management almost always has good intentions, but intention does not always result in impact. Good safety leadership requires systematic assessment of the impact of management actions:

- Do the safety programs deliver the desired outcomes?
- Are the communication systems effective at disseminating information?
- Do individual leaders effectively coach their direct reports in safety?

In sum, do the safety efforts of management result in improved safety? In our experience, there are many safety leadership practices and safety programs that are used with the best of intentions but actually work against the development of an exemplary safety culture (the use of safety incentives based on incident rate, to name just one). Given that safety resources are always limited, why spend time and money on practices that don't have high impact? Using the science of behavior as a guide, we have developed a framework of leadership practices that have high impact and that help move organizations toward a high-performance safety culture.

Taking the luck out of safety requires that leaders let go of outdated, low-impact strategies and replace them with evidence-based practices that create a safer workplace. [OHS endbug]

To read more about safety leadership practices that don't work and practices that do, read "Safe by Accident? Take the Luck out of Safety -- Leadership Practices that Build a Sustainable Safety Culture" by Dr. Judy Agnew and Dr. Aubrey C. Daniels. Agnew is a leading authority in the field of behavioral safety and performance management and senior vice president of Safety Solutions at Aubrey Daniels International. Daniels, founder of ADI, has devoted more than 30 years to working with organizations to apply the science of human behavior in their workplaces. To purchase "Safe By Accident," visit <http://www.safebyaccident.com>.

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Dr. Judy Agnew is Senior Vice President of Safety Solutions at Aubrey Daniels International (ADI). With more than 19 years of consulting experience and a Ph.D. in Applied Behavior Analysis, Agnew partners with clients to create behavior-based interventions leading to optimal and sustainable organizational change. She is the author of *Removing Obstacles to Safety* (with Gail Snyder) and *Safe By Accident?* (with Aubrey Daniels).

Aubrey Daniels is an authority on applying the scientifically proven laws of human behavior to the workplace. For more than 30 years, Aubrey and his colleagues have helped leading organizations employ the timeless principles of behavioral science to re-energize the workplace, optimize performance, and achieve lasting results. He is the author of five best-selling books widely recognized as international management classics: *Bringing out the Best in People: How to Apply the Astonishing Power of Positive Reinforcement*; *Performance Management: Changing Behavior That Drives Organizational Effectiveness*, *Other People's Habits*, *Measure of a Leader*, and *Oops! 13 Management Practices that Waste Time and Money (and what to do instead)*. His books have been translated into Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Spanish, and French and have been licensed in China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Romania, and Saudi Arabia.