



## Developing a Proactive Health and Safety Program

By David Lukcso, MD, MPH

OSHA requires every employer to provide a place of employment free from recognized hazards. Critical areas of a successful occupational safety and health program are management commitment, employee involvement, hazard identification and control, accident investigation and continuous safety improvement.

Success of your company's program requires that management demonstrate an interest and long-term commitment to health and safety. Commitment must be driven by a desire to improve the company's safety culture and be supported by effective safety policies, procedures and recognition programs. Employers that understand the long-term benefits of an effective safety culture will focus on proactively doing everything possible to maximize safe production. Every action a manager or supervisor takes demonstrates his or her safety leadership and sends a positive message to everyone about commitment to safety and health.

Some companies have adopted a reactive, backward-looking approach. They assume that accidents just happen and there's not much that can be done about it. Reactive responses usually have the purpose of minimizing the costs; however, they always cost much more than proactive programs because they aren't implemented until an injury or illness has occurred. These programs may include accident investigations to primarily place blame, incentive programs that reward withholding injury reports and disciplinary programs tied to injuries.

A proactive strategy emphasizes prevention - taking action before an accident happens. There are no excuses for accidents. Proactive programs are less expensive and send a message of caring to all employees. They may include accident investigations to determine system weaknesses, education and training, job hazard analysis and recognition programs.

An emphasis on accident prevention, more than loss control, will keep people healthy and productive and decrease the long-term costs of doing business. For every proactive dollar spent preventing workplace accidents, four to six dollars are saved in direct/indirect costs. According to the National Safety Council, which considers all industries nationally, the average 1998 direct and indirect cost of a lost time injury is over \$28,000 and a fatality averages \$910,000.

Employers must establish company policies, procedures, job descriptions and rules to clearly convey standards of performance in safety and health to employees. If employee safety performance meets or exceeds the standards set by the employer, some sort of recognition should follow. On the other hand, if the employee makes an informed choice not to comply with the company's safety rules, some sort of appropriate corrective action should follow. Effective consequences increase desired behaviors.

It's difficult to have an effective program without developing a corporate safety culture that encourages genuine employee involvement. Proactive recognition programs reward employee behaviors that occur before an accident. When employees are recognized and rewarded for proactive behaviors, they become more aware, interested and involved in uncovering unsafe work conditions and practices. They know that reporting injuries as soon as they occur reduces lost work time and accident costs.

All workplace hazards exist in four general areas: (1) materials; (2) equipment, machinery, tools; (3) the environment; and (4) people. The first three categories represent hazardous physical conditions in the workplace and represent about 3% of all accidents in the workplace. "People" refers to employees at any level of the company who may be using unsafe work behaviors or practices, and represents the causes for about 95% of all workplace accidents.

To identify and control hazards in the workplace before an incident or accident occurs, three basic strategies are used. The most common hazard identification strategy is the walk-around inspection. Unfortunately, the walk around inspection can be ineffective, uncovering only 10% of the causes for workplace accidents, because most inspectors do not take enough time to effectively analyze individual task procedures.

Job hazard analysis, the second strategy, uncovers unsafe work procedures as well as hazardous conditions because sufficient time is given to the analysis of one unique task. Each task is observed, divided into steps, hazards identified and then analyzed to determine safe work procedures that will eliminate or at least reduce any hazards present.

The third strategy includes both informal and formal observations that occur continuously throughout the entire workplace.

If your hazard identification and control program fails to eliminate workplace hazards, chances are pretty good an accident will happen. The only way to receive any benefit from accident investigation is to make sure root causes are uncovered and permanently corrected. The surface causes of accidents are those hazardous conditions and individual unsafe employee/manager behaviors that have directly caused or contributed in some way to the accident. The root causes for accidents are the underlying system weaknesses that have somehow contributed to the existence of hazardous conditions and unsafe behaviors. Root causes always pre-exist surface causes.

Safety education and training is extremely important to a successful safety and health effort. Unfortunately this element is often neglected or managed ineffectively because the benefits may not be immediate, tangible and directly related to profits. It is imperative that workers be educated about why the change is important. Without such education, motivation and persuasion, efforts of change will likely fail. A successful safety and health program involves every employee in an organization and a proactive strategy in detecting and eliminating workplace hazards. By initiating and continually refining processes to meet these critical steps, your organization can develop a strong safety culture and meet its goals of providing a safe work environment for your employees and controlling health care costs.

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