

Developing a mature safety culture: Everyone must step up to be a safety leader champion

By Ron Clem, Executive Training International

SAFETY LEADERSHIP HAS been the “buzz” phrase and a major focus for most companies over the last few years. Organizations strive to improve HSE performance by adopting new strategies, training initiatives and slogans to reach “Goal Zero” where “no one gets hurt.” Historically, the worldwide oil and gas community, focused and pro-active, has held sacred its positive safety and HSE performance. Safety is truly No.1 on most corporate agendas, and this should be applauded.

So, with effort, resources, time and money clearly directed toward safety, why are people still getting hurt? Why are safety performance data for companies with offices around the world so varied? Corporate and local safety goals are the same and are embedded in company mission and vision statements. Safety awareness conversations and activities are common in the workplace.

Despite these consistencies, observed and documented performance differs greatly in different parts of the world. Could it be that employees behave differently depending on the HSE climate where they work? An understanding of this variation can provide opportunities to close this dangerous and deadly gap.

A mature safety culture is still developing in most regions of the world. Unfortunately, based on current HSE data, that culture is not where it needs to be to keep everyone safe. Experience confirms that three major components influence effective HSE performance.

1. Verbal and observed top management support for HSE.
2. Policies, procedures, equipment and specific HSE training.
3. Safe employee behavior/active and proactive.

Though all three are present in most energy organizations, documented and safe employee behavior varies widely depending on the job, company, client and immediate supervisor. Even with top management support for HSE, employees behave differently because their “safety culture” is different.



Executive Training International holds Safety Leader Champions courses around the world that train people to constantly scan surroundings for both positive and negative HSE behaviors and conditions.



Safety should be practiced everywhere because it is second nature and one does not even have to think about it, not because a sign reminds us to be safe.

I ask students in our Safety Leader Champions courses around the world: “What are the results of unsafe acts and behaviors?” Their reply: “We have accidents, people get hurt!” etc.

What normally happens, however, is nothing. And when nothing bad happens to us, we experience “positive reinforcement” for unsafe behaviors. When “nothing happens,” employees tend to repeat these behaviors. Eventually time, place

and situations line up, and someone will get hurt – or worse.

Safety leader champions constantly scan their surroundings for both positive and negative HSE behaviors and conditions. Unfortunately, this is not the norm for many employees. You only have to travel a short distance or view a cross-section of communities to see abundant and blatant examples of individuals engaging in unsafe acts.



Documented and safe employee behavior varies widely depending on the job, company, client and immediate supervisor. Even with top management support for HSE, employees behave differently because their "safety culture" is different. Above, a safety training class engages in a team-building exercise.

In recent travels to a developing country, appalled but not surprised, I consistently observed people engaging in behaviors that endangered themselves and others. Workers on bamboo scaffolding, agile and quick, jumped, with no fall protection, from one part of the structure to another.

On the same journey, it was common to see three, four and sometimes five family members on one small motor bike amid a heavy congested traffic of cars, bicycles and other motor bikes. Parents or older adults on the motor bikes were wearing helmets; small children were not. When asked why children were not wearing safety helmets, I was told, "It's not required by law. For adults, yes, but for children, no." Surely you can recount similar situations from your experiences.

And let's not be quick to point fingers at developing countries. A colleague in Oklahoma City, Okla., sent me news of a friend whose father died in an accident while watching construction at his church. A crane attempting to add a steeple to the church building collapsed and crushed his father's car. One news flash called it a "freak accident." Was it a freak accident, or a situation where holes in the safety barriers lined up at just the wrong time?

The news article explained, "There have been several deadly crane accidents around the country this year, including one in Houston last week that killed four workers and injured seven others. Crane-related deaths have also occurred in New York, Miami and Las Vegas. An Associated Press analysis in June found that cities and states have wildly varying rules governing construction cranes.

"Cranes in Oklahoma fall under OSHA regulations but operate without any state oversight, state labor commissioner **Lloyd Fields** said. He said Oklahoma may join other states considering improved regulatory oversight of cranes. Oklahoma is among 35 states that do not require crane operators to be licensed."

MATURE SAFETY CULTURE

Do you have a safety culture where you work and live? If so, why do people still engage in unsafe acts? Why do employees from the same company have such diverse and varied safety records depending on client and work location?

Perhaps the answer is that a mature safety culture does not yet exist in various companies and locations even within the same company. Within minutes of arriving at a work location, the safety culture can be easily recognized. Many

times there is a mature safety culture that is alive and well. However, some locations only pay lip service to safety: Employees talk about it but don't live it.

So what is a mature safety culture? Students in my classes discuss various situations and relate diverse behaviors. "Tell me how and why you behave differently in different situations and environments?"

"Tell me what you do or say or wear at work, at your family gatherings, at religious activities, weddings, funerals, sporting events, etc?"

"Tell me what you don't do or don't say at these events."

When entering a cathedral, mosque, church or synagogue, do you wear a swimming suit? Do you smoke cigarettes and drink alcohol during religious ceremonies at these places? Do you tell rude jokes? There is always a resounding "no."

Then I ask: "Are there signs reminding people not to wear swimming suits there? Are there signs and slogans reminding people not to smoke or drink alcohol there?" No, these signs and slogans are not necessary because there is a religious culture that people understand and observe. We do or don't do things because we know this is a place of worship and reverence. This is a mature culture.

A mature safety culture exists when signs, slogans and campaigns are not necessary; we know exactly what to do and what not to do because it is second nature and one does not even have to think about it. It is our normal, natural, comfortable and reinforced HSE behavior.

So, a burning question remains: How do we develop a mature safety culture?

Here are some thoughts for consideration. As in most HSE meetings, training programs, etc, we need to continue to stress the importance of safety. Key company leaders must demonstrate and carry the banner that promotes HSE in word and deed. Fortunately, in most successful organizations, this is second nature to most executives and line managers.

What else can be done? Remember, performance that gets rewarded gets repeated. Proactively recognizing safe personal behaviors moves us toward maturity. Usually, when someone



To develop a mature safety culture, the importance of safety must be stressed at meetings and training programs. Company leaders also must demonstrate that they truly care about HSE and proactively recognize safe behavior.

behaves in a safe manner, nothing is said. Do we say thank you to the people in our cars that automatically fasten their seat belts? Do we compliment workers engaged in safe work behaviors that we encounter at work or in our local communities? Do we recognize and reinforce taxi drivers who drive defensively and wear seat belts and have seat belts available to passengers in both the front and back seats?

The answer is probably ... not often enough. Again, behaviors that get rewarded, get repeated. Dare we ignore positive HSE behaviors and instead only recognize and critique unsafe behaviors?

The number of negative versus positive interventions with most HSE programs tells the tale. Sincere, appropriate, timely and consistent recognition must become the priority for safety leaders and team members. This demonstrates that a mature safety culture exists. Automatically, we know what to do and say and what not to do and say. Signs, slogans and programs are great but can never provide the power of sincere recognition for mature safe behavior.

Safety leader champions constantly and consistently monitor their environment to safeguard and enhance a mature safety culture. We must be vigilant.

Consistent, unrelenting steps toward our goal of "no one gets hurt" demands that we never let our guard down at work or at home – ever.

Remember, each one of us must lead the way. "If it is to be, it is up to me." The challenge is to accept the personal and professional responsibility to be a safety leader champion who positively influences the behavior of others. You might just save a life!

Ron Clem is president/CEO of Executive Training International. This article is based on a presentation at the IADC Drilling HSE Europe Conference & Exhibition, 9-10 September 2008, Amsterdam. ♠