▶Safety**Culture**

BY JUDITH A. ERICKSON
ERICKSON ASSOCIATES

THE NEED FOR EVIDENCE-BASED INTERVENTIONS

A three-year nationwide study explored the effects of corporate culture on the level of safety performance (Erickson, 1994). The goal was to provide scientific data that would further the cause of optimal safety program organization and functioning. An extensive literature search performed as a prelude to that research indicated that no similar studies had been performed. The safety profession needed a scientific basis to support widely held opinions and numerous anecdotes that corporate philosophy played a major role in the level of a company's safety performance.

SH&E professionals must understand and be familiar with the scientific and empirical foundation on which any safety intervention is based. If independent studies are not the basis for these interventions, there is a reasonably good chance that companies may be wasting their time, money and effort on them. Initially, a nonscientific approach may produce temporary positive effects (the Hawthorne Effect), but long-term benefits may not be realized.

A similar case can be made for various management intervention programs. Pfeffer and Sutton (2006) stress the importance of focusing on managing based on evidence, data and facts. The central theme of this management book is the premise that decisions and actions should be the product of logical thought and be fact-based--in other words, they should be arrived at via the scientific method.

Both the practice of safety and business management need scientific evidence supporting them. However, many practices are often so well established that few question them. Strong evidence suggests that companies function better by using business principles based on high-quality research, rather than by jumping to implement the latest trendy approach (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006). Despite this, many business operations and safety efforts are not truly based on hard, supportive evidence. Some platitudes have

been repeated and taught so often that they are simply accepted as true despite evidence to the contrary.

Therefore, SH&E professionals should ask: How much of what we do to increase safety performance is based on scientific evidence or hard facts?

Employees Want to Feel Valued

The pivotal finding from the Erickson research (1994) is that the way in which, employees are treated is the factor most significantly related to the level of safety performance. This finding was somewhat surprising since it seemed that safety-related considerations would be foremost. In addition to being more statistically significant than any safety-specific areas, it was the most predictive factor in the level of safety performance.

Research from disciplines such as human resources, occupational psychology and business supports this finding. Even though these disciplines examined different end points, such as absenteeism (Watson Wyatt Worldwide, 2002; Sutton, 2007; CCH, 2007), job satisfaction (Zohar, 2000; Bowen & Lawler, 1995; Turner &

Parker, 2003; Bond, Galinsky & Swanberg, 1997), or profitability (Maister, 2001), the same or similar organizational cultural elements were instrumental in attaining organizational excellence.

An important occurrence for any researcher is replication of his/her research results by independent researchers because such results support the original findings. This dovetailing of research findings from diverse disciplines highlights the importance of treating safety in an integrative manner--as part of the organization, not in isolation. Therefore, one could reasonably deduce that safety interventions which solely target safety performance gener-

ally will not be effective in the long term.

People have long used the phrase, "thinking outside the box," to mean reframing or looking at old information in new ways and from new perspectives. However, people often try to protect themselves when receiving information--if it does not match their points of view or frames of reference they try to ignore or reject it. People become used to old ways of thinking and feel vulnerable if pressed to process new and unfamiliar information. The current emphasis of caring and feeling for employees, rather than just ensuring that they work safely, may be construed as such a threat. However, people can challenge their preconceived ideas by being willing to examine their ideas with the scrutiny of critical thinking and analysis.

The assertion that soft skills such as communication, respect, listening, trust and caring are important is not "psychobabble." Studies from various disciplines indicate that organizational success is determined by these skills (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999; Watson Wyatt Worldwide, 2002; Maister, 2001; O'Toole, 1996). And, while it is natural to try to track these elements, they often do not seem to be measurable by any standard technique or protocol. However, their effects can be measured in both safety and

business performance.

For example, one can be a technically competent SH&E professional, but unless employees perceive that the professional truly cares about them, the safety program may be far less than is possible. Consider this hypothetical scenario: A company has a technically competent SH&E professional, but his relationship with employees makes them feel he does not care for them as individuals. According to employees, he brags about socializing with managers, thereby suggesting that his status within the company hierarchy is more important than theirs. The employees do not care what this safety professional does when he is not working. Their concern is how he does his job, how he relates to them and whether he cares about them and their welfare.

To be truly effective, SH&E professionals must care about employees and find ways to communicate their genuine concern for employee welfare. This requires application of soft skills.

Yet, as much as an SH&E professional may care, it is not enough if organizational support is lacking. This brings us to a basic underpinning of corporate culture: assumptions about human nature. For example, what are the basic assumptions concerning the nature of employees? One basic tenet of social psychology, the study of how people behave in groups, is that the stereotype of a group is never true of the individual (Brown, 1965). Therefore, there is no stereotypical employee. Employees are a diverse group of people. They are individuals with unique talents, abilities and ideas that can benefit their organizations. How could a one-size-fits-all program work?

Another perplexing aspect of employee-oriented injury causation programs is the reasoning that employees are injured because 1) they do not know how to work safely or 2) they do not care to work safely. Education and training would seem to address the first statement. Yet, initial employee safety orientation is often not sufficient for attaining high safety performance (Erickson, 1994). Employees also need mandated periodic training as well as training when new processes, chemicals or equipment are introduced or when they are transferred to new locations or departments. This is an example of the power of scientific research--obtaining statistically significant and meaningful data. The second cited reason--that employees do not care to work safely--is simply difficult to believe.

What About Leadership?

As noted, more and more companies are analyzing corporate culture as a means of increasing safety performance. Many such interventions focus primarily on leadership. Although leadership is an integral part of communicating the corporate culture,

unless basic assumptions and values are oriented to employees as valuable resources, leadership training is essentially meaningless (Bennis, 1989; O'Toole, 1996; Peters, 1987; McGregor, 1985).

Leadership is not a technique nor is it a function of position and authority. In the author's experience, it cannot be readily learned or taught since effective leadership is a function of personality, which begins with self-awareness. Awareness involves modifying beliefs about oneself and one's own behavior.

Maister (1997; 2001) provides a succinct synopsis of what effective leadership entails:
Those you lead will never have a longer-term horizon than you do. Those you lead will never operate to higher standards than you do. Those you lead will never be more optimistic than you are. Those you lead will never live the vision if you don't.

The expression "attitudes are caught, not taught" is telling. When talking with others, words and body language contain messages that address both the reasoned and emotional responses of others. Therefore, to talk about successful leadership is to focus on how to communicate with and respond to the needs of employees. The literature supports the assertion that leaders who treat employees as individuals, who allow them to think for themselves and accept responsibility to take initiative, are more likely to create safer, more successful businesses (Broadbent, 2004). For leaders to inspire and empower others, practical application of the soft skills is crucial.'

Perception Surveys: A Step in the Right Direction

Organizational factors are statistically related groupings of subtopics, such as communication and employee involvement, that are directly and significantly statistically correlated with the level of safety performance (Erickson, 1997). To evaluate the effect of corporate culture on safety performance one must address both safety program and safety process elements. An effective way to achieve this is through a validated perception survey that effectively identifies and evaluates both elements.

A validated survey is not only descriptive, it is also predictive. With a validated survey, the responses related to optimal safety performance are already known. Therefore, the survey responses and their statistically related organizational factors that are helping or hindering the level of safety performance can be readily identified.

This step is critical because in order to derive successful solutions, one must first operationally define the situation targeted for improvement. With an operational definition such as that attained through a validated survey, everyone in the organization is defining safety in the same manner.

REFERENCES

Bennis, W. (1989). Why Leaders Can't Lead: The unconscious conspiracy continues. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Bond, J.T., Galinsky, E. & Swanberg, J.E. (1997). The national study of the changing workforce, No. 2 (Publication No. 98-01). New York: Families and Work Institute.

Bowen, D. & Lawler, E. (1995, Summer). Empowering service employees. Sloan Management Review, 73-84.

Broadbent, D.G. (2004). Maximizing safety performance via leadership behaviors. Invited presentation at the 28th World Congress of Psychology, Beijing, China, Aug. 11-14.

Brown, R. (1965). Social psychology. New York: The Free Press.

Buckingham, M. & Coffman, C. (1999). First, break all the rules: What the world's greatest managers do differently. New York: Simon & Schuster.

CCH. (2007). CCH survey finds most employees call in "sick" for reasons other than illness [Press release]. Riverwoods, IL: Author. Retrieved Sept. 23, 2008, from http://www.cch.com/press/news/2007/20071010h.asp.

Erickson, J.A. (1994). The effect of corporate culture on injury and illness rates within the organization. Dissertation Abstracts International, 55(6).

Erickson, J.A. (1997, May). The relationship between corporate culture and safety performance. Professional Safety, 42(5), 29-33.

Maister, D. (1997). True professionalism. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Maister, D. (2001). Practice what you preach: What managers must do to create a high achievement culture. New York: The Free Press.

McGregor, D. (1985). The human side of enterprise. New York: McGraw-Hill.

O'Toole, J. (1996). Leading change: The argument for values-based leadership. New York: Random House.

Peters, T. (1987). Thriving on chaos. New York: Knopf.

Pfeffer, J. & Sutton, R.I. (2006). Hard facts, dangerous half-truths and total nonsense: Profiting from evidence-based management. Boston: Harvard School Publishing.

Sutton, R. (2007). Building a civilized workplace and surviving one that isn't. New York: Warner Business Books.

Turner, N. & Parker, S.K. (2003). Teams and safety. In J.Barling and M.R. Frone (Eds.) The psychology of workplace safety. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Watson Wyatt Worldwide. (2002). WorkUSA 2000: Employee commitment and the bottom line. Arlington, VA: Author. Retrieved Sept. 23, 2008, from http://www.watsonwyatt.com/research/resrender.asp?id=W-304&page=1.

Zohar, D. (2000). A group-level model of safety climate: Testing the effect of group climate on microaccidents in manufacturing jobs. Journal of Applied Psychology, 85(4), 587-596.

Jerome E. Spear, CSP, CIH
President

Safety, Health, and Environmental

spear consulting, LP

19314 Timber Ridge Drive, Suite 100
Magnolia, Texas 77355
Phone (281) 252-0005   Fax (281) 252-0092
www.jespear.com
jerome.spear@jespear.com