

Improving Safety Performance in the Workplace by Tony Blyth – Director Health and Safety Assurance Services Limited

All too often we hear of major industrial accidents that have resulted in loss of life, serious injuries and a significant impact on those businesses and communities involved. In many cases the underlying cause of the accident is poor safety behaviour that has been allowed to develop by the leadership of the company. Failure to influence the safety behaviour of the workforce tends to encourage attitudes that lead to people thinking; *“I don't have enough time to follow the procedure”,* or *“It's easier to do it this way”* or perhaps worst of all, *“No one has ever been hurt doing things this way”.*

It's obvious that people do not deliberately set out to injure themselves or their fellow workers, however, their behaviour in the workplace is a manifestation of both their working environment and of the culture that they experience each day. If this environment does nothing to positively influence their behaviour then these potentially dangerous attitudes are likely to prevail and create a near perfect breeding ground for accidents.



**Texas City explosion
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The global nature of today's economy where businesses are driven largely by productivity and costs there is a tendency to create a culture where production targets and profit margins drive management thinking over other considerations. In such an environment it is relatively normal for the safety and health of the workforce to become important only after a serious accident has occurred. Then, and usually only for a short period of time, safety becomes a business imperative and is raised to a conscious level over most other business considerations. This is particularly apparent where criminal charges are likely to be laid. Unfortunately after a relatively short period of time this level of consciousness around the accident and safety in general diminishes, and the organisation reverts back to "business as usual". This sequence is even apparent where a major accident has hit the national consciousness through widespread media coverage. However, all too often lessons that have been learned from the accident and the safeguards that have been put in place to prevent a recurrence are lost through changes at senior level, middle management and amongst the workforce. This is because the safety values that the business holds to be important have not been communicated to new members of the workforce and a new culture, where safety is considered less important than other considerations, begins to take shape. So how can a culture be developed and sustained in a business where safety and health become a core component of its every day activities alongside profit, production and other important business considerations?

It is our experience at HSAS that the safety values held by the leadership team, from board level down to the point of delivery - the place where most accidents occur, will determine the culture and behaviour of the organisation they control. The reasons for this can be complex but generally speaking the workforce will seek to deliver the things that they consider are important to the leadership. Thus, a leader who says that safety is important to the business but who continually focuses on profit and production issues during their daily activities such as meetings, discussions and communications, will not achieve improved safety performance. Conversely, when a leader matches their rhetoric with continuous and visible support for the safety values they want to see reflected in the business, there is likely to be a dramatic reduction in the number of accidents and incidents involving their workforce. One might paraphrase this using a workforce mantra that implies *'I hear what you say, but I believe what you do!'*

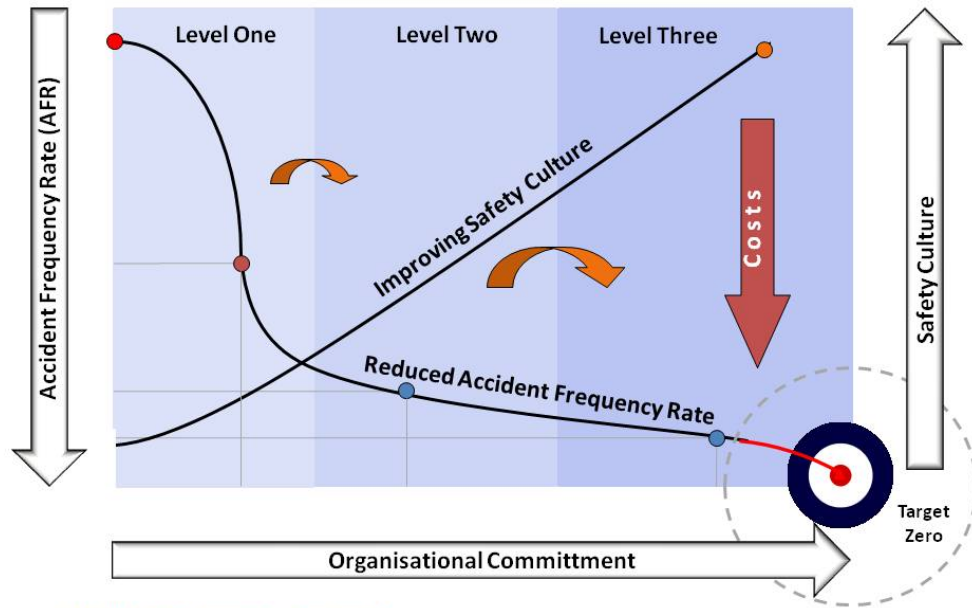
So how can a change in behaviour be achieved? Successful companies that we work with continually demonstrated to their workforce that safety and health are equal in importance to costs, quality, and production and as result have created a high performance culture within their business. Such a culture ultimately feeds through to other aspects of the business and invariably results in improved bottom line performance.

This of course is easier said than done, and there are no 'quick fix' options to changing culture. The process must be seen as a journey and that it will take time to bring about the improvements in workforce behaviour that will lead to a reduction in the frequency of accidents. Whilst some performance quick wins are usually possible, the process of developing and embedding the new safety culture will take several years to achieve.

The starting point, as ever, is with board members or directors who will need to identify a clear safety vision and supporting values for their business. From these, strategies can then be identified that will accomplish the vision and embed the values within the organisation. Key leadership skills need to be understood by all board members and directors so that the vision, values and strategies can be cascaded down to the team leader who manages the day to day activities of the workforce. The alignment of these processes, strategic, tactical and operational, is critical to business success so as to create a high performance business culture that continuously delivers excellent safety performance particularly at the point of delivery. In this regard managing health and safety is no different to the way in which finances are managed within an organisation. You would not expect an organisation not to have a financial strategy and processes in place to drive this strategy through every level in order that it is understood and their part in achieving it.

Developing the leadership team from board member to team leader, through focused bespoke training workshops and follow on support, plays a critical part in building a common understanding of how to achieve the level of performance improvements that can be justifiably regarded as 'world class'. Some organisations set a target of 'zero accidents' and create annual programmes designed to stretch the entire workforce and raise performance standards so as to move ever closer to attainment. Some people regard such a target as misguided but the fact remains that the most successful organisations see zero as the only acceptable objective.

Developing Safety Culture



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HSAS has extensive experience in working with businesses across many industrial sectors both in the United Kingdom, Europe and the USA. We have helped our clients to improve their safety performance and as a consequence reduce the financial impact and productivity losses that a poor safety record can bring about. HSAS teams work to build a thorough understanding of each business and their existing culture from which a specific plan of action can be developed for each client. Our track record of helping our clients to improve the safety performance of their businesses will stand testimony to the effectiveness of our processes.

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