

Leaders, Followers & Gamblers

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In interviewing company managers and safety and health consultants for this month's "World Class Safety" article (see pg. 23), you quickly find yourself asking, "Is the glass half-full or half-empty?" While many companies are doing exciting things to improve their safety and health performance, many others are, at best, locked in a compliance mentality that continues to estrange safety from the rest of the company.

You can probably divide companies into three classes of safety performance. The first are the leaders, the companies we are concentrating on in this month's cover story. None of them are perfect, as they are the first to admit, but there is a culture in these companies that strongly values and supports safety, health and environmental performance and seeks to improve it over time.

The followers are the compliance-minded companies, which view safety not as a value but as a legal responsibility. This silent majority does not want employees to be hurt, but because they see safety largely as an externally imposed requirement with little return, their efforts will be based on expending as few resources as possible.

Finally, you have the gamblers. This group includes OSHA's infamous "bad actors" as well as many more companies who lack the knowledge, resources or will to achieve compliance with OSHA, yet alone integrate safety into their job processes and management system. They manage safety with their eyes closed and their fingers crossed.

Dr. David L. Goetsch, a Florida-based safety and quality consultant, cites executive commitment as one of the necessary elements for a world-class safety program. He wants to see that safety is part of a company's strategic plan and evidence that good safety performance is rewarded. But

instead, he usually finds, "It's not in the strategic plan. The safety manager is a third-level position out of the human resources department. There is nothing in the performance evaluation about safety and there is no financial reward for working safely."

Steve Meyers, a safety and industrial hygiene consultant with ERM based in Irvine, Calif., notes that much of his work involves compliance audits. For many such clients, he admits: "If they can get into compliance and they can do what the law says

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they need to do, then they feel comfortable."

Doing only what the law says they need to do, obviously, is not how companies succeed in business. They succeed because they have products or services that others want; they meet their customers' requirements for quality, features and price; and they establish sales, marketing and distribution functions so that customers can readily purchase their products.

John Kanouse, a vice president with Johnson & Higgins/Marsh & McLennan, cites common elements he sees in companies that achieve world-class safety. Those elements have little to do with government standards. They include:

- Upper management support and commitment for safety in order to provide adequate resources and maintain long-term performance.

- Company standards or guidelines that provide minimum acceptable performance levels for safety. The company may choose the most stringent standard in existence for all operations, country-by-country standards, or develop its own, say Kanouse. It may be a short document or three volumes, he notes, but it provides "marching orders, so people know what is expected of them" in managing safety.

- An evaluation process that checks actual performance against the internal standards.

- Designing in safety from the start rather than fixing safety problems after operations begin.

- A good communication system so that all levels of an organization understand what safety goals are and what efforts are underway to achieve them.

- Involvement at all levels in safety, whether it is through safety committees, employee feedback systems or employee teams leading safety.

Our experts agree that changing a culture from compliance to a more aggressive, integrated approach to safety takes time. It must have support from the top. Getting that support may be determined by the individual skills and persuasiveness of the EHS director or manager. If he or she can put together a good plan that reflects company values and sell it to top management, then that top-level support trickles down throughout the organization.

Outsourcing safety activities said one expert, "is great for us as a consultant, but it is hard to get it ingrained in the corporate culture." More often than not, after presenting a plan, developing programs and doing initial training, he lamented, "When we walk out the door, we know darn well the program is going to fall apart."