

Safety: The Unexpected Benefits

by STEVEN FELLMAN

RECENTLY I PARTICIPATED in an industry panel regarding safety. I gave the typical lawyer's presentation, discussing OSHA requirements, worker's comp claims, the importance of developing a culture of safety on the jobsite – you know, "same old, same old." Most of you have heard the same presentation by lawyers, safety experts and OSHA officials a dozen times. When I finished, I sat down and sort of half-listened to the next speaker. However, the more he spoke, the more interested I became.

The speaker was the President and CEO of a manufacturing company with roughly 30,000 employees throughout the U.S. and Canada. For years, the company had compared its safety record to those of its competitors in the same industry. It was doing better than the average company in the sector, and management was satisfied. However, one day they had a fatality on the job. The CEO took the responsibility of calling on the employee's family. He met a young widowed mother and several young children. He was deeply troubled, went back to his office and began re-evaluating the company's position on safety. He started to compare his company's safety record not only to other companies in his industry but also with other industries entirely, some of which had much better records. He decided that the time had come to improve the company's safety performance.

The CEO then began to describe the actions his company took. It enlarged the internal staff of safety experts, hired outside consultants, involved management in efforts to improve safety, enhanced safety features on equipment, and

set up a new educational program designed to empower every company employee to be a part of the safety solution. Safety became part of every employee's job responsibility – and not just their own safety, but the safety of those around them, too. It took several years, but eventually, company employees bought into the new safety program. They recognized that management was concerned about their welfare. The attitude of company employees began to change.

Next the CEO described a recent


"Plants with improved safety records also saw productivity gains across the board."

visit to one of his company's plants that had recently been remodeled. New manufacturing equipment had been installed on the production floor. He walked the floor, looking at the new equipment and shaking hands with production workers. He walked around one piece of equipment and went to shake the hand of the equipment operator. He held out his hand but the equipment operator refused to shake it. She pointed out that by walking around the equipment as he did, he had engaged in an unsafe activity. She explained how he should have approached the machine from the other side and avoided the potential danger. Here she was, an hourly production worker, explaining to the company President and CEO (whom she had never met) what was safe and what was unsafe. He thanked her, went back, walked

around the machine the safe way... and then they shook hands.

After describing that event, he went on to discuss an amazing phenomenon. He said that over the years, the company had developed a series of complex metrics to measure plant performance. In comparing the various plants in the company, management found that if one area of performance was down, there were recognized steps that could be taken to improve it. Sometimes, a specific improvement step would improve two or three areas of performance. However, the company had never been able to design a program that would increase all levels of performance in a facility.

The company employed a staff of number crunchers who were responsible for evaluating overall performance and reporting to management. One day the top number cruncher visited the CEO and reported that the plant with the best safety record had also improved productivity *in every category of measurement*. Checking the company's other plants, the statistician had also found that, sure enough, as safety improved, productivity improved across the board. In fact, over the course of the company's 60-year history, the safety program was the only initiative that had ever led to such enhanced performance.

What more can you say? It really does pay to work safely. 



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