

The Constant Pursuit of Improved Safety

The Deepwater Horizon disaster placed a temporary global spotlight on drilling and production safety, but safety is a constant concern for those within the industry.

The industry's continuous process improvements and procedural changes designed to eliminate accidents and injury are evidence of that focus. Workers wear more and better personal protective equipment. Hazardous areas are cordoned off. Tools have safety guards. Chemical monitors abound. However, despite these myriad safeguards, the industry is not getting safer.

Both industry insiders and outsiders would likely be surprised to find that from 2003-2007, the fatality rate among oil and gas extraction workers was nearly eight times that for all U.S. workers. Even more sobering is the truth that a company's size is directly related to its employees' safety. Workers employed by small companies were three to five times as likely to suffer a fatal injury as workers from medium and large companies respectively.

Combined with the continuing trend toward increased outsourcing on the part of large companies, that statistic raises more concerns. Smaller companies are not as well equipped to institute, initiate and maintain comprehensive safety systems. It's not simply a matter of increased enforcement. The economic realities that drive outsourcing conflict with the resource allocation needed to fund the development and maintenance of safety processes within small to medium companies.

That being said, safety procedures do not make a safety culture.

Identifying a Safety Culture

As BP and the Deepwater Horizon illustrated, a confused or misdirected safety policy can result in loss of life, property and livelihood. Insiders, employees and onlookers have affirmed how tough BP's safety procedures were, at least for them.

Safe practice is common though safe procedure – like documentation and reporting – and tends to vary greatly from company to company. Safety culture is quite another matter. Tough rules don't make a safe culture. If the culture does not call for safety to trump operational expediency, accidents will happen. The odds for injury, death and damage increase when safety is an add-on or an adjunct.

These signs indicate the absence of a safety culture:

- The safety organization hierarchy differs from the operational hierarchy.
- The leading proponents of safe practice are the safety professionals and not the bosses and managers.
- Safe procedures are not priced and included in bids, proposals and project plans.
- Customers regard safe practice as an overhead cost absorbed by their vendors.
- Safety violations that result in fines are part of an economic calculus.
- Managers whose operations don't comply with safety standards face no consequences as long as there are no accidents.

Creating a Safety Culture

As a service provider, GlobaLogix has the unique challenge of creating and sustaining its own safety culture, while operating within its clients' safety processes. Getting to zero accidents, property loss and personal injuries is tough enough with a legacy system in place. Achieving that goal while simultaneously building a company from the ground up presents a number of challenges.

After its founding in 2004, GlobaLogix had a handful of employees that generally knew how to work safely, but as a company had no procedures in place. There were no safety manuals, formats for reporting, job safety analysis guidelines or policies for periodic safety meetings.

The company's leadership began by demonstrating the actions and activities desired in the staff, managers and technicians. Executives toured facilities and job sites. Senior management personally attended safety meetings, conferences and training seminars. Encouraging, enabling, enforcing and empowering safe practice was and remains an integral part of the senior executives' daily responsibilities. When there was a safety related problem, incident or fault it became the immediate focus for the President and Vice Presidents. Leadership spent time – valuable and rare– on safety.

There were both opportunity and financial costs involved. We spent time on safety which others suggested devoting to business development, sales and operational efficiency. Often it did not result in any immediate or intermediate net gain. There's no feel good calculation that proves that safety pays – until someone gets injured or killed.

Customer satisfaction presented the biggest challenge to the creation and ongoing maintenance of our safety culture. Not all client companies operate with the same safety standards for themselves, their vendors or contractors. Those with rigid standards don't necessarily overlap and match each other. What's good for one producer is forbidden by another.

Even further, some multi-nationals don't have a common internal standard. One major had five HSE standards in North America, so it was possible to be in compliance in one region but not in another with the same company. To further complicate things, it is possible to be in compliance in one location with one division but not with another within the same company. The consolidated safety web sites PEC Premier and ISNetworkworld have helped the most to facilitate compliance with varied standards from different customers. When conflicts exist we always accommodate the higher standard. When new projects begin (whether with a new customer, or within a new region), one of the first visitors is the safety manager to observe and determine compliance.

Continuous improvement is a central theme of GlobaLogix' safety processes and procedures. When customers offer audits of our processes and procedures, we invite them in. We've taken the view that scrutiny is a learning opportunity to demonstrate our adaptability. We welcome client participation in the creation and ongoing maintenance of our safety policies and procedures.

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