

Developing a Culture of Prevention

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There is a good Barbadian saying that goes, 'prevention is better than cure'. It is hard to cure how a man thinks but it is easier to change how this man acts after something goes wrong. However in safety and health, the whole point is prevent something from happening; therefore working safely must be enshrined from the very point of recruitment. The need for a change in how persons perceive working safely is increasingly gaining greater consideration among management. Working safely is not an innate characteristic but rather a learnt behaviour and therefore needs to be treated as such. Understanding the gravity of unsafe work practices companies must train their employees to think safety first. Having an employee analytically view a situation and conceptualise the steps to mitigating risk, then there is evidence of maturity in this field and the culture is critical to this.

What is the definition of culture in safety and health and how can this lead to accident/illness prevention? *"The safety culture of an organisation is the product of individual and group values, attitudes, perceptions, competencies, and patterns of behaviour that determine the commitment to, and the style and proficiency of, an organisation's health and safety management. Organisations with a positive safety culture are characterised by communications founded on mutual trust, by shared perceptions of the importance of safety and by confidence in the efficacy of preventive measures."* (ACSNI Human Factors Study Group: Third report - Organising for safety HSE Books 1993) An organization's safety culture is the result of a number of factors, but to encourage a change from negative to positive the organisation needs to have guiding policies and procedures; support employee growth and understanding through employee training and motivation; and improve employee involvement or "buy-in."

However, to encourage greater culture change there needs to be a national campaign for the creation of a safety culture that leads to the prevention of accidents. A national shift

in the safety culture from reactive management (cleaning up after something happens) to proactive management (putting controls in place to avoid the accidents) is the way to creating a culture of prevention in Barbados. The steps for realising this culture shift include:

1. An increase in positive safety cognition (the beliefs, attitudes and values of nationals),
2. An increase in positive safety decisions (rituals, habits and plans by organisations), and
3. A decrease in risky behaviour.

For the above to be realised a basic understanding of what is currently happening and what has happened before is needed. This is where national statistical compilation is imperative. Robert E. McKee a previous Managing Director at Conoco (UK) Ltd. once said, "Safety is, without doubt, the most crucial investment we can make. And the question is not what it costs us, but what it saves". In exploring the concept of prevention, what steps must the organisation and the national bodies take to drive a culture of safety? The following aspects are proven to be the most important aspects of a positive safety culture:

1. **Management commitment:** This is indicated by the proportion of resources (time, money, people) and support allocated to health and safety management and by the status given to health and safety versus production, cost etc. The active involvement of senior management in the health and safety system is very important as well as the perception that management is sincerely committed to safety.
2. **Good communications between all levels of employees:** In a positive culture health and safety forms part of everyday work conversations. Management and employees alike should listen actively to what the other is saying and take what is heard seriously. The best route of communication for safety is the all channel route of communication, where communication can freely occur top down and bottom up.
3. **Comprehensive Policies and Procedures:** Safety policies must be developed according to the Safety and Health and Work Act for the management of health

and safety in the workplace. A basic policy statement is not sufficient; the organisation must institute Standard Operating Procedures. These procedures outline the safe process of conducting various tasks as well as to itemise the expectations.

4. **Training:** Preparing a positive safety culture begins with the calibre of employees hired - competency is paramount. However, over time employees should be retooled and reskilled in their areas. Additionally, employees must have an understanding of their safety requirements. Targeted training should be conducted in areas of safety and health such as fire safety, first aid, basic safety and health and safety committee operations.
5. **Facilities for Reporting** - Adequate channels for reporting of unscrupulous workplace practices and accidents must be facilitated. Report forms must be accessible and the person to whom reports are made must be approachable. As noted earlier, positive safety cultures are fostered by trust and respect. The implementation of Safety Champions may assist in facilitating this process and allow for positive feedback.

There are many benefits of developing a positive safety cultures. The organisation will notice a reduction in accidents and injuries which in turn can significantly reduce cost. There is a well-known safety quote which says, *Know safety, no injury. No safety, know injury*. Today we must invest in a culture of prevention in order to reduce the negative consequences.