

ORC Commentary on Safety Abuses at McWane

In February 2003, The New York Times ran a three-part series that chronicled the alleged workplace safety abuses and resulting injuries and deaths occurring over the past several years at industrial facilities operated by McWane Inc. The Times described a culture at some McWane facilities where intense production pressures regularly put workers at risk and resulted on several occasions in severe injuries or death. The articles reported that basic and essential safety and health requirements were frequently ignored and that injury rates at some facilities were extremely high in relation to the average for that industry.

In response, ORC sent the editor of The Times the following letter that reflects ORC's 30-year involvement with leading global companies through its [Occupational Safety and Health and Environmental Practice](#). The newspaper as yet has printed no letters to the editor on the subject.

To the Editor:

Your three-part series chronicling the reckless disregard for the lives, health, safety and dignity of the workers at Tyler Pipe and other McWane Inc., pipe foundries, is a shocking but valuable reminder to a too-often heedless public of the dangers that millions still face each day in too many American workplaces. Every year or so, it seems, the major media report on some similarly outrageous pattern of behavior by some rogue employer. But, predictably, after a week or so of public indignation about both the tragic consequences of such corporate behavior and the seeming inability or unwillingness of regulators and law enforcement officials to end the lawless conduct, the issue of workplace safety recedes into the background.

It is baffling to many who devote their professional lives to protecting workers that there is not an ongoing and unrelenting sense of public outrage about the 19 workers who, on average, die every day of every year in America from workplace injuries. Before our heightened attention to this issue once again slips away until the next tragic story gets reported, two key points deserve our consideration.

First, as the second Times installment and the Frontline episode too fleetingly point out, it does not have to be this way. Just as Tyler Pipe's principal competitor, the American Cast Iron Pipe Company, has taken a different path towards worker safety and competitiveness, the vast majority of the most successful companies in America understand that to be competitive and prosperous they must first protect, respect, and value their workers. These companies, their leadership, and the talented and dedicated safety and health professionals who work for them are constantly looking for new ways to improve worker safety.

One of the principal tools businesses use to improve their safety performance is sharing with each other, even with their most fervent corporate rivals in the marketplace, the protective measures and management approaches -- the best practices -- that are proving to be most successful in controlling and eliminating hazards and reducing injuries and

illnesses in the workplace. There are many active business forums dedicated to assisting companies in their efforts to make worker safety not just a top corporate priority but a central corporate value. Among the most successful of these are the [Occupational Safety and Health Meeting Networks](#) of Organization Resources Counselors, Inc. (ORC), which for thirty years have provided ongoing opportunities for many of the leading global corporations -- now numbering over 150 -- to expand their knowledge and exchange information on how to improve their safety and health programs and performance.

Second, as was suggested in your series, we cannot complacently rely on government regulators and law enforcement to keep the workplace safe. It is certainly true that the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration has never had, and almost surely never will have, either adequate legal authority or sufficient resources to achieve its lofty mission of assuring so far as possible safe and healthful working conditions for every working man and woman. But even if Congress, in a rare bipartisan effort, found a way to craft narrowly focused revisions to the law that would better enable the agency to more successfully pursue corporate outlaws of the type described in your series, that would only be a start.

What is missing is a relentless, pervasive social intolerance for the kinds of workplace conditions that your series describes. Communities, including local and state law enforcement, the political establishment, the media, and ultimately the citizenry, must make it clear that as part of the “franchise to operate” a business, companies must conform to the same kinds of lawful and “civil” behavior as the everyone else. In short, there must be a fundamental shift away from the willingness of the American people to tolerate the kinds of conditions described so vividly by the Times. Nothing less will really make a lasting difference.

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