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Safety Directors Who "Get It"

By Bob Vavra
Editor

Building safety into an organization can start at the top, and many CEOs "get it" as we note each February. For the majority of companies, though, safety processes might get overlooked if not for the continuing efforts of safety directors.

That's the case with Ron Thackery, vice president of safety, risk and fleet management at American Medical Response, Englewood CO, which provides ambulances for emergency medical services. "I was honored to be chosen by *Safety+Health* magazine as a "CEO Who Gets It," said William Sanger, CEO of American Medical Response, who appeared in the February 2004 issue. "But the simple truth is that without the leadership and innovation shown by Ron, AMR would not be demonstrating the excellence in safety that allowed my nomination and selection."

Efforts by safety professionals such as Thackery demonstrate that safety is a core value, and that core is the place where attention to workplace safety and procedure begins.

So how does a safety director "get it"? There are some basic things safety directors we talked to understand about their role in driving safety throughout an organization. Safety directors who get it make sure that safety is a core business value. They understand that good safety initiatives need to be identified and expanded throughout an organization. With the emphasis on homeland security and off-the-job safety, some safety professionals have taken the message of safety beyond their company walls. For those smaller organizations without a person who holds the title of "safety director"—and the number of those companies continue to grow—there is still the understanding of the importance of safety and the need to make safety an important part of their organizational culture.

How do safety directors "get it"? Here are a few examples:

Make safety a core business value

When Delphi spun off from General Motors Corp. in the late 1990s, the parent company had finally "gotten" safety and made it a cultural cornerstone of the organization. Not surprisingly, safety received the same level of visibility at Delphi. Troy, MI-based Delphi manufactures automotive components and systems technology.



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"Our health and safety policy statement was that safety was the overriding priority of the company," said Karl Bossung, Delphi's corporate director of health and safety, who drafted the policy statement in January 1999. "That doesn't mean it's the No. 1 priority. It means that when all things are equal, it's the greatest of all equals. You don't have to sacrifice safety to get profitability."

That's a message that Bossung has championed throughout Delphi since the company's inception. "Karl instilled his philosophy of, 'Safety isn't one person's responsibility; safety is everybody's responsibility' into the minds of our joint union and management leadership from day one," said Mark Lorenz, vice president, operations and logistics for Delphi. He said Bossung's efforts "create a culture that an injury-free workplace is an achievable goal, and in order to accomplish this, everyone must work together as we are all each other's 'keepers'.

"Karl brings a wealth of knowledge in his field and attributes that wealth to his 17 years of manufacturing experience working on the factory floor with the hourly employees and respecting and seeking their input in making the workplace safer," Lorenz added.

Even as Bossung drafted Delphi's safety policy, he knew that creating a written policy was only the first step of building a safety culture. "For us, it was a seven-year culture change. The top leadership was trained first. That took a year-and-a-half, but what it made them do was change their view of safety," Bossung said. "Then the middle managers trained for two to three years so they'd understand their roles and responsibilities. Then we've trained the hourly and front-line supervisors."

Any cultural change requires its architects to build consensus among the various stakeholders, including all levels of management, employees and their union representatives. Bossung and his team fostered significant participation and cooperation from union employees and senior management, and Bossung drove both processes up and down the organizational chart. "We got unions directly involved in the process," Bossung said. "We needed the unions' buy-in, and they've helped us develop the culture change."

The core of that culture is an ingrained commitment to champion safety at every opportunity. "Safety is always an agenda item in every meeting. Usually it's the first thing on the agenda," Bossung said. "When you come into our plants, everyone gets a visitor orientation on safety. It doesn't matter if you're the CEO or you've been to that plant a hundred times. Everyone sits and watches the visitor orientation. Top executives expect to watch the video when they visit a plant site. How can you ask someone to do something you're not willing to do yourself?"



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In an organization that includes members who have diverse roles and responsibilities, establishing a clear line of responsibility for safety is essential to building an effective system. Stakeholders need a place to which all other parts of the company can go for guidance. "In our company, safety is manufacturing's responsibility. They are the established owner of the safety process. The plant manager is the one who's responsible," Bossung said. "This way, we made the plant managers get involved in safety. That sets the bar for everyone else."

"What matters is that everyone has roles and responsibilities. There can be different cultures in a plant, different cultures from shift to shift. You have to go in with leadership to set the levels of acceptable behavior," Bossung said. Even as the payoff shows up in Delphi's safety numbers, Bossung knows these numbers are still not enough. "We've reduced our lost workday and recordables by 95 percent in 10 years. We have 3,500 fewer lost workdays and 35,000 fewer recordables just by a culture change. We just energized everybody in safety," he said. "It's easy now to get complacent. Now is the time we need leadership. Now is the time to keep the ball rolling. Until we get to zero, it's not good enough. We had 300 failures in the system last year."

Brenda Harrison has been the worldwide environmental safety and health director for Dallas-based Texas Instruments since 1998. Among her first tasks was improving the company's recordable injury rate, which went up in 1998 and 1999.

To begin to make the improvements, Harrison worked with Kevin Ritchie, senior vice president of the technology and manufacturing group at TI, to turn the initiative into a high priority item for the organization. Harrison and Ritchie met monthly to keep talking with the manufacturing group about the status of progress and to keep him informed about the data supporting the efforts to that point.

Another area to get Harrison's focus was ergonomics, an important issue for a semiconductor manufacturer. "An analysis illustrated that 38 percent of TI's lost/restricted day case rate was related to ergonomics issues such as neck, back and wrist injuries," said Ritchie. "Brenda knew this rate could be drastically reduced by increasing the scope of the ergonomics program and making sure the work environment fit the employee, as opposed to fitting the employee with the job. This simple yet logical approach made good business sense." It made good safety sense as well. "We have seen a 79 percent drop in ergonomics-related injuries since 2000," said Ritchie.

TI's record has improved in other areas under Harrison's leadership. "TI's safety rate has improved 89 to 90 percent over the last 10 years," said Ritchie. "Brenda's vision and leadership are some of the reasons, but the key to her



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success is her working relationship and influence with senior manufacturing leadership that allows for an open door of communication."

Expand successful safety initiatives

Abbott Laboratories had long championed the idea that safety and health initiatives were important within manufacturing and R&D business units throughout the corporation. The company realized that the same effort should apply to employees within the commercial organization's whose jobs required them to be on the road as a major part of their job responsibilities. When they realized that a comprehensive safe driving effort could help keep Abbott's 20,000 plus commercial employees safe on the road, the company plotted a program to make driving safety a company-wide initiative.

Joe McKillips jumped at this chance to lead that effort at Abbott Park, IL-based Abbott Laboratories, which manufactures pharmaceuticals and medical products.

"We realized two or three years ago that we had the same opportunity for success in our commercial vehicle area," McKillips said. He is manager of Abbott's Commercial Program Support for the Global Environmental, Health and Safety Organization. "We had previously focused many of our environmental, health and safety efforts within our manufacturing and R&D environments. In 2002, we established a full-time position to administer our fleet safety effort. We put a formal commercial fleet safety technical standard in place that paralleled many of our other health and safety standards. It was a practical standard, and we were able to hit the ground running."

McKillips leads the program at Abbott, called "Driving for Safety." The Abbott program includes an introductory brochure explaining why the program was instituted and why it was important for all Abbott employees to become familiar with it. The program was also launched with a formal commercial-wide awareness campaign, and required the development of a comprehensive written fleet safety program for each Abbott division.

"Were now at the stage where we're capturing new hires within our training programs, scheduling people for this training, and making sure we're doing training for our managers and our high-risk drivers," McKillips said. "My role is to work with our division commercial liaisons to set up the program infrastructure. We have also established an executive council that meets twice a year where we review the needs and expectations for the program."

McKillips' focus now is the behind-the-wheel driver training for new employees as well as regional and district managers. Managers also are expected to ride with employees and talk about driving safety, while high-risk drivers within the organization will be identified and provided with additional training. Driving ability



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will also be a factor in an employee's overall performance appraisal.

While the measurement of the program is ongoing, the primary expectation is to get key commercial management trained and informed about the program's longer-term goals. "We have looked closely at our vehicle crash rates but at this time we are not using them to completely drive our program. Instead, we are focusing our efforts on the establishment of solid program elements and systems. I'm afraid we might lose emphasis if we spend too much time focusing on incident numbers at this early stage," McKillips said. "We're in the third or fourth inning of a nine-inning game. Various divisions are at different levels with their programs."

"Our main focus is to work on heavy recognition of the effort. Thus far, we've been able to establish a solid program identity through numerous internal communications which include consistent graphics, logos and messages surrounding the effort. The whole program ties together nicely and has really taken off."

In taking what has worked and expanding it to other areas of the company, McKillips' goal is to help identify unsafe behaviors, give managers the tools to improve safety, and create a way to achieve those goals. That is a journey, McKillips notes, and not simply a destination. "Distracted driving is a good example. Our first priority is to get recognition for the problem of distracted driving," he said. "We need to be very methodical about our approach with the elements that bind the program together. We have a three-year compliance window. That gives everyone a nice road map."

Expand the safety message outside the company's walls

For Diagnostic Laboratory Services in Honolulu, Tom Goob brings safety together.

The safety, health and environmental affairs manager for Diagnostic, Goob is responsible for more than 400 employees in labs throughout the Pacific. He's also stepped up to bring others labs in the region together to deal with the critical issue of shipping laboratory samples by air at a time when shipping such materials is under intense scrutiny.

"By the nature of our geography, air shipping is a major necessity for us," Goob said. "Being able to transport on airlines is essential. Airlines became concerned about our shipping of biological materials, and there were not a lot of options. There are not a lot of airlines that fly these routes."

When Aloha Airlines expressed concern about hazardous material shipping procedures among island companies, Goob brought other safety managers together to determine what the procedures were. "We found out we were being



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inconsistent in the way we interpreted the shipping regulations."

Goob facilitated the organization of a group that established guidelines for material shipping, and Aloha Airlines signed off on the procedures that all labs in Hawaii follow.

That effort was expanded recently to the rest of the area when Pacific Micronesia Airlines expressed similar concerns. Working with the Pacific Island Health Officers Association, Goob established not just rules for shipping but also effective training for companies throughout the Pacific. That means a cooperative effort among all three parties—the airlines provide free airfare for shipping, the association pays for Goob's expenses and Goob has the company's blessing to take the time.

Everyone wins in this arrangement. "It helps maintain our ability to ship, and to get testing to avoid what could be a real public health problem," Goob said. In addition, Goob teaches occupational safety and health courses at the Honolulu Community College and is often asked to be a speaker at meetings around Hawaii. "Tom not only 'gets it,' he also works very hard to assist others in getting it through his teaching, public presentations and visibility in the community," said Jim Peck, a Honolulu-based safety and health consultant.

None of this outside activity has slowed safety processes within Diagnostic Laboratory Services, however. Goob helped conduct a reorganization of the health and safety structure within DLS, with a new safety and health council replacing a safety committee, and with senior-level executives planning a safety strategy.

Employees get involved by sitting on a series of committees that range from laboratory safety to needlesticks to ergonomics. The ergonomics focus group, for example, led to significant changes in office procedures.

"By pushing down safety, we've seen a huge dip in our workers' compensation claims," Goob said. As a result, the company's workers' comp premiums are down 27 percent. "I attribute that to getting employees involved in these committees," he said.

Ron Thackery has had a similar impact on safety beyond the walls of AMR. He's spoken to the Society of Automotive Engineers about how AMR's "black box" data recorders have been able to document driving safety for medical crews. The system provides an audible warning if drivers exceed company safety standards. "in the two years that AMR has used this road safety technology under Ron's direction, the company has seen dramatic and life-saving improvements," Sanger said.



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Another innovation at AMR is the use of special units to assist bariatric patients who are extremely obese when they need emergency care. The system provides safety for the ambulance workers and dignity for the patients, many of whom weigh more than 600 pounds.

Saying that Ron Thackery 'gets it' when it comes to safety may not do him justice," Sanger said. "Ron leads the way in discovering, understanding and solving safety issues so that others can "get it."

Improve safety without a safety "director"

In one sense, one can say accurately that Rib Lake Health Care Center has no safety director. In another, one can say accurately that they have 95 safety directors.

The skilled nursing facility, located in the town of Rib Lake in northeastern Wisconsin, regularly cares for about 65 patients. Their work involves every aspect of patient care, from lifting patients from their beds to providing medical care and diagnostics.

In 1998, Rib Lake's safety statistics needed some rehabilitation. Even in an organization without an on-site safety director, the cause of safety needed to move forward. "Seven or eight years ago, we had high workers' comp rates," said Jean Richert, executive director at Rib Lake. "Along with investigating causes and providing modified duty for workers when they came back, we wanted to get our numbers down."

Richert isn't a safety professional by training. She has worked in long-term care facilities for 35 years, however, and has seen the evolution of safety equipment improve workplace injury prevention. Her challenge was to incorporate make safety the foremost thought on her staff's minds.

The first step was to beef up training in all aspects of nursing care. "We started by sharpening up and honing our training skills," Richert said. "When a person is first hired, there are certain things we want them trained on — using lifts to move patients, for example. We wanted to make sure everyone was trained on safety." The next step was empowering staff to take workplace safety to heart. They must be prepared for emergencies in case of fire or weather-related emergencies. Moving themselves and their patients in such a crisis takes a trained, coordinated effort.

"Everyone is responsible for their own safety, and for their co-workers and for the residents," Richert said. "We always have to be vigilant for the safety of our residents. We knew we had to get a handle on this."



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Beyond safety training was making sure staff used the equipment properly. Lifting patients safely is important for both staff members and patients. "We had enough lifts. Our parent company provided the lifts but if they're not being used, they're not making much of a difference. We worked with staff to make them realize they were there to help them and that they needed to use them."

Richert also is making an effort at Rib Lake to recognize the safety efforts, and to make sure staff knows commitment to safety starts at the top. "There's very much hands-on involvement from senior staff," Richert said. "Sometimes in a large corporation, the safety staff is someplace remote. In a small nursing home, they're all right there on site. I don't expect the staff to do anything I wouldn't do." The results of that work are compelling. The recordable incident rate at Rib Lake has dropped from 23.9 in 1998 to 2.1 in 2003. The lost workday incidence rate fell from 11.2 in 1998 to zero in 2003. The Wisconsin Safety Council honored the facility earlier this year for its excellence in making safety a priority.

Beyond the simple improvement in numbers, Richert has helped Rib Lake change the way its staff views safety. "It's a mind-set. It's a commitment by all the staff," Richert said. "It started out as a much more intense training program. Now it's just the way it is."

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