

To Advance, Don't Improve Departmental Safety?

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PHOENIX (H&U) –

Below is an example of possible unwritten rules the employees may devise to achieve their goals.

1. Not contributing — Do not stand out as an innovator and therefore be retained longer. [What is meant here is to not become so valuable to a given department that promotion out of that lower-level department becomes more difficult or even impossible.]
2. Since departments are measured on performance — Watch the quarterly reports so as not to be flagged as a nonperformer.
3. Avoid failure — Don't take any chances; limit participation in teams that may fail.

4. Keep the boss happy — Do whatever it takes to stay on the boss's good side to ensure promotion.

Doing so may produce the following outcomes:

1. Short term-ism
2. Poor team work
3. Lack of cooperation
4. Little or no innovation

(Source: "Managing System-Driven Incidents—A Business and Performance Approach," by Peter G. Furst. *International Risk Management Institute*. August 2011.)

It's the first number 1 above that interests us most for the purposes of this short article.

Normalization of Deviance

This point by Peter Furst ties in well with Diane Vaughn's sociological research concerning what she terms the "Normalization of Deviance" (See Hill & Usher's article: "De-Normalization of Insurance-Coverage Deviance-082811.pdf").

Diane's general point is that because an accident hasn't occurred concerning something that is actually breaking the written rules, the tendency in organizations is to

accept the rule breaking or deviance as the new normal (often courting disaster). The unwritten rule becomes the standard, accepted operating procedure. Peter Furst's observations jibe with that, but we want to emphasize that management and systems-thinking can unwittingly also promote errors on account of unanticipated selfishness on the part of individual employees and/or groups.

Selfishness?

Perhaps you're thinking that everyone looks out for self and that it's only the negative aspect of that fact that concerns you. Well, that's fair enough; but let's delve into it a bit more in an attempt to clarify what constitutes "negative" here.

Surely, you agree that from the overarching organizational standpoint, Peter Furst's example employee (who deliberately, consciously, does not contribute to improving safety but rather simply follows all of the existing rules so he or she will not be held back from promotion for actually being less self-centered) is a prime representative of the negative type of self-interest.

Perhaps also, a number of thoughts enter your mind about, for instance, "not making waves." After all, plenty of safety improvements can require radical change. As we all know, many people get to the top by only appearing to offer radical, valuable change. Also, to climb the ladder,

one must step over other managers who fear change or who are deeply engrained in the "don't innovate, just follow the rules" model and who also don't want to see underlings leapfrog them.

The reasons for obstacles are as numerous as the imagination; but unless we look at them square on, people's lives can and will be left in great jeopardy, as Diane Vaughn pointed out happened with both Space Shuttle disasters.

All crew members died in each case, and neither accident would have happened had it not been for at least the "Normalization of Deviance." We say "at least" here because we are fairly confident that some of the negative-selfishness problem was also no doubt present amongst the numerous governmental and corporate entities involved in both errors: O-rings and thermal tiles.

Negative Selfishness/Short-Sightedness at the Top

So, here we have the people who often climbed by having achieved promotions by playing safe for self (but not necessarily for others and all) and who also are the ones most responsible for establishing and changing the organizational culture from that "failure to contribute"

mentality to an actual culture of safety and other innovations for the sake of all concerned.

It's a dilemma, and it's critical to confront it on every level.

If the Shoe Fits...

You may be that owner, that president, that CFO, or department or project manager who says about this article, "right on." On the other hand, you might be seeing your current pattern of thinking and behavior in the negatively selfish, ostensible team member. If you do, there's no time like the present to begin changing that

pattern. Start by sharing this article around the office and field. Get the juices flowing. Speak with those who are most responsible for organizational-safety systems. Work this safety-innovator friendly thinking into your own systems, in writing, executing, and following through.

Comprehensive Approach

A truly comprehensive approach assumes the position that improving is never ending. It must include what we've heard called "thinking outside the box." Hunting down the unwritten rules, whether 1) an individual's 2) a group's within the organization or 3) the whole organization's, is required for a constantly improving and comprehensive approach.

We hope you've enjoyed this safety-management article. Stay tuned to Hill & Usher. There will be more coming your way. In the meantime, if you want assistance with safety or any other insurance- or surety-related matters, don't hesitate to let us know. We've tried to make that as convenient as possible for you below.

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