

SAFE TEA TIME

TEA

Incommunicado



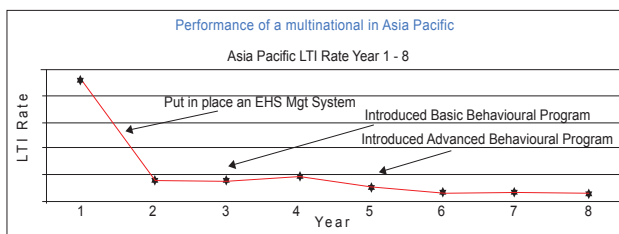
by Ir. Shum Keng Yan

WE have covered the fundamentals of building a framework for an occupational health and safety management system. The occupational health and safety policy is hanging nicely on the wall, the manuals are thick and imposing, the risk assessments and legal registers are impressive but wait a moment, why doesn't anybody do something with all the stuff we have painstakingly prepared?

STANDARDS DRIVING PERFORMANCE?

One of the drawbacks that I continue to see in the safety field is the silo syndrome. By and large, we are very responsible corporate citizens. The traditionalist safety professionals tend to think of themselves as "policymakers". They put down the requirements in writing and then send out (or get the managing director to send out) a nice lengthy email and, lo and behold, it is supposed to be done!

Until someone checks it out of course. However, we need to keep in mind that we are not regulators. We should be business partners in the organisation. It is a tough call yet we need to start it right and improve year on year. A top down approach can only drive performance to a certain level.



The above is a typical chart on how performance moves with various safety initiatives. For the sake of simplicity, the Lost Time Injury Rate is used as there is less "noise" in the data. A comparison with some multinationals in this region (and with a different region) shows a similar trend. The time required to achieve the results varies with the amount of resources pumped in.

Where more resources and effort are pumped in, improvements can be achieved in a shorter time. However, what I would like you to understand is the pattern. We can achieve a very drastic performance improvement but it will eventually flatten out.

PEOPLE DRIVING PERFORMANCE

We really need to obtain acknowledgement, acceptance, implementation, involvement, maintenance and review to drive safety programmes. This is the ideal process and, for this to materialise, we will need to engage (firstly) our internal customers.

They are the employees, supervisors, line managers, senior managers and business leaders. These people ensure that safety is being implemented. Procedures and standards are static. Human resources are dynamic.

STARTING THE ENGAGEMENT PROCESS: COMMUNICATION

A key element in driving safety is engagement. I will share more engagement strategies in future discussions. One of the basic components of engagement is communication (or usually the lack of it). At the end of the spectrum exists a highly engaged organisation where safety is more than just a culture, and where employees are "connected" when it comes to safety.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

Each level in the organisation, each age group (baby boomers, Gen X and Gen Y) and each department will respond to the same message in a different way. To illustrate, think of a group picture. Snap! Then you project this picture on the screen to the group. What is the FIRST thing you will look at?

I would like to see where I am in the picture – am I smiling, blinking, blocked, etc...? Naturally, any person will look at his or her own key interest! If the person is not in the group, he will naturally look for some familiar faces to try and make a link to the picture. This is engagement at the most basic level.

SELLING THE MESSAGE

Now, think of the safety message that you would like to sell to the audience. What is their stake in the picture? What matters to them? Traditionalists like to use the phrase – "the law says so". It is a quick method when time is not on your side or when the opposing party needs to conform FAST (for some reason). It is convenient; however, the effect is not too lasting.

Perhaps we should look at what we can do to sell the safety message. Start by selling the key points in the package most acceptable to the customer. This is similar to segmenting the market and addressing the customer's needs (customer focus).

Next month, we will look at safety communication in more detail. Listen to your own internal voice and experience on what works best for your company. ■

Talking is a small part of communication, not the other way around! Good talkers do not make a good communicator.