**Safety’s paradigm shift: Personalize it!**

Why do you think the number of worksites enrolled in OSHA’s Voluntary Protection Program (VPP) has boomed from 104 in 1992 to a high of 1,720 in 2010 (to 1,454 in 2015 due to backlog)?

The surge of interest in VPP (OSHA’s doesn’t have the resources to keep up with demand) is just one facet of an evolution – if not a revolution – in how companies address workplace safety and health issues.

From 1970, when President Nixon signed into law the Occupational Safety and Health Act, creating OSHA, through the early 1990s workplace safety centered around rules, regulations, compliance and enforcement. Safety officers in companies performed a policing function. It was a matter of command and control. Employees were “commanded” to “do safety” to comply with OSHA. It was a military style; in fact many safety managers at that time came from military backgrounds.

In the mid-1990s OSHA’s “standards-setting muscle” began to atrophy. After a quarter-century of adopting voluntary consensus rules and regulations from ANSI and other organizations, and aggressively writing many new standards, essential OSHA standards for most significant workplace safety hazards had been published in the *Federal Register*.

Then standards fatigue set in. Plus, bold OSHA standards proposals, such as updating hundreds of permissible chemical exposure limits (PELs), establishing ergonomic requirements, and regulating aspects of motor vehicle safety, faced legal challenges due to scientific, economic, and feasibility arguments. All three of these potential standards failed to proceed past the proposal stage. To clear legal hurdles, it took longer and longer to formalize OSHA rules – an average of a decade. In one instance, OSHA first began work on a confined space standard in 1975. The final rule was issued in 1993 – 18 years later.

**The rise of behavior-based safety**

As OSHA’s standards-setting powers peaked and began to wane, a concurrent, counter-compliance trend emerged. It was led by occupational psychologists specializing in behavioral science. Their focus was not rules and regulations. Leading proponents, such as Dr. E. Scott Geller of Virginia Tech and Dr. Tom Krause of Behavioral Science Technology (BST) rarely if ever even mentioned OSHA in their increasingly popular lectures, articles and books.

A fundamental shift was occurring. Workshops at national safety conferences attracted standing-room-only crowds – not to learn about OSHA standards, engineering controls and machine guards, the “hard” side of workplace safety – but to understand the new language and theories of behavior-based safety, the “soft” side that emphasized personal behaviors, attitudes, values, beliefs and perceptions.

For the past 20 years, since the mid-1990s, U.S. industry has increasingly embraced the value of personalizing safe behaviors. Dr. Geller identified five personal factors that influence an employee’s willingness to “actively care” about safety: 1) self-efficacy --“I can do it”; 2) personal control -- “I’m in control – not OSHA”; 3) optimism --“I expect the best safety outcome”; 4) self-esteem --“I am a valuable contributor to safety”; and 5) belongingness --“I belong to a team that cares about safety.” These personal factors combined to create empowerment --“I can make a positive difference in the safety of my workplace,” in Dr. Geller’s words.

Behavior-based safety popularized the idea of personalizing safety. And occupational psychologists and organizational management consultants insisted that workplace safety could not be personalized in a vacuum. A culture of safety processes, behavior modeling, mentoring, coaching and awareness reminders and reinforcements within a company was necessary to support and sustain a personal commitment to safety. Employees had to believe that senior leadership truly valued safety. Safety was no longer a much-vaunted priority, because an organization’s priorities change in time. In contrast, safety was defined now as a value, embedded in a company’s core operating beliefs, philosophy, personality, DNA, mission, vision or creed. Safety as an embedded corporate value is not easily or quickly dismissed.

**Selling the value proposition**

If employees were to take personal ownership for safety, be held personally accountable for safety, to conduct personal risk assessments, they had to be “sold” that their employer was sincerely invested in safety as a core value. Safety needed to be marketed internally.

This was part of safety’s revolution. Safety officers shifted from being policemen on the beat preoccupied with enforcement and discipline to specialized marketers. But they couldn’t be the only influencers and persuaders. Safety communication had to begin at the top. Plant management, senior non-safety executives had to talk the talk and walk the walk. To create a powerful, personal emotional connection to safety, leadership had to champion safety knowledge, sharing, caring, transparency and engagement.

There was a time when company executives looked at safety and perceived it only as an OSHA issue. That mindset made it easy for executives to distance themselves from safety. But now, if safety was to be driven home as a corporate and personal value, executives had to become models of behavior, mentors, and coaches. A number of business leaders now looked for ways to leverage safety communications and marketing – both internally to employees and externally to stakeholders.

One way to persuade and convince employees that safety is an organizational core value is to take on the arduous, time-consuming, labor-intensive process of achieving OSHA’s Voluntary Protection Program “Star” or “Merit” status. This sort of investment speaks louder than words. VPP participation exploded. Companies flying the red, white and blue VPP flag at their worksite today include Frito-Lay, General Electric, IBM, 3M, ExxonMobil, LL Bean, Ben and Jerry’s, Bechtel, Omaha Steaks, Pfizer, Wyeth, DuPont, L’Oreal, Mary Kay, John Deere, Halliburton, Hallmark Cards, International Paper, Georgia-Pacific, ConocoPhillips, Walgreens and NASA.

VPP is a template for achieving and sustaining above-average safety performance, in terms of industry injury and illness rates. But every VPP members employs different strategies and operating philosophies to gain success. GE, for example, recently has implemented human and organizational performance (HOP), according to Ann R. Klee, the VP of EHS, speaking at the 2014 annual meeting of VPP members . HOP starts by recognizing that human error is part of the human condition. Performance improvement is pursued through identifying hidden weaknesses and traps associated with the operating systems that GE workers must navigate to do their jobs. The GE corporate EHS team oversees and supports HOP goals with training, tools and cross-business forums. The team also oversees long-term plans for HOP integration developed by individual GE businesses using risk-based prioritization.

**VPP as branding**

VPP exemplifies how workplace safety has become part of corporate branding. Four of *Fortune* magazine’s top ten most-admired companies are VPP members: Amazon.com, Starbucks, General Electric, and Coca-Cola. What makes these companies most admired? *Fortune* lists nine key attributes of reputation rank. Two relate to workplace safety: people management and social responsibility. Those four top reputable companies enrolled in VPP not surprisingly score best-in-class in managing their people and being socially responsible.

Ensuring employees go home to their families unharmed and healthy every night is an exercise in managing people, and in being socially responsible. It builds a company’s reputation both externally and internally. It signals to all stakeholders – customers, the public, the media, stockholders, activists, regulators, board members and employees at every level of the organization – that ownership takes caring for its people and its social responsibilities “personally.” Employees up and down the line, white collar and blue collar, take their lead from the top and are much more likely to “buy into” safety and come to believe that, in Dr. Geller’s terms, “I can do safety;” “I’m in control of my safety;” “I expect the best safety outcomes;” “I am a valuable safety contributor;” and “I belong to a team whose safety I care about.”

Getting employees to internalize safety and make it personal is critical particularly in light of today’s unsettled employment picture. More work is being outsourced to independent contractors, temporary workers, and freelancers. “Internal branding” is a strategy to bring about a sense of stability, security, and pride in employees’ organizations, in their daily work – and in their ability to work safely .

A Gallup poll shows most employees are adrift in their organizations. Only 13 percent of employees worldwide are engaged and motivated by their work, according to the poll. More employees – 20 percent – are actively disengaged. The stakes are high. It’s estimated 70 – 80 percent of corporate initiatives fail due to a dearth of engaged employees. McKinsey Global Institute estimates productivity increases by 20-25 percent in organizations with engaged, connected employees.

**Harnessing the employee’s voice**

Another important reason to have employees buy into the brand is the rising power of what’s called “employee voice.” Companies need to harness the voice and credibility of employees. Employees are ten times more effective than CEOs at influencing public perceptions, according to studies. One survey by Edelman PR estimates that the perceived credibility of employees has risen by 47 percent and CEO credibility has dropped by 25 percent. So increasingly you see corporate advertising shine the spotlight on airline baggage handlers, plumbing repairmen, auto insurance agents, assembly line workers, restaurant cooks and waiters, oil field roustabouts, construction workers, utility linemen, and retail clerks and salespeople. The emphasis is on everyday heroes.

Corporations today realize their reputations and organizational cultures are built by these everyday heroes. And culture matters. A Harvard Business School study conducted over 11 years showed companies with strong cultures – shared values, feelings of belongingness and engagement – outperformed counterparts. Revenues on average were 4.1 times higher; stock prices 12.2 times higher; and return on investment 15 times higher.

Building a culture and brand equity is a marathon, not a sprint. Still, many firms take shortcuts and try quick fixes. It’s a superficial and artificial attempt. The result: lack of communication, understanding and engagement. Two-thirds of technology industry employees are unaware of the environmental, health and safety functions in their workplace, according to a study by the Antea Group. Only half (55 percent) of employees feel comfortable pointing out potentially unsafe behavior to both their peers and superiors. Of particular concern, a large percentage (62 percent) likely would not feel obligated to intervene (actively care) if they saw an unsafe act performed by a co-worker. A significant percentage (36 percent) would not appreciate if they were told they were doing something potentially unsafe, and 38 percent would actually be offended by such feedback.

**Building a culture**

How do you overcome these barriers create and sustain a robust, vibrant and personalized safety culture? That’s a top goal of most safety and health professionals. According to a reader survey by *Industrial Safety & Hygiene News* magazine, 54 percent say it is a priority to build and/or maintain a safety culture for their organization, and 60 percent report that it is a priority to gain employee safety and health engagement/participation/accountability.

Some components of a safety culture are invisible – values, beliefs, perceptions, attitudes, feelings of empowerment and belongingness, emotional connections and trust.

Other aspects of a safety culture are obvious from the front gate to the back door. Good lighting. Lack of clutter. Orderliness. Clear aisles. Markings, signage, directions. Emergency equipment such as showers and eyewash stations, AEDs and fire extinguishers. Posted and framed safety pledges and mission statements. Posters and banners. Scoreboards to automatically track performance. Use of personal protective equipment (PPE). Machine guarding. Alert systems such as one that uses traffic light color codes to indicate safety conditions in the workplace (red warns that a lost-time accident has occurred; yellow instructs workers to proceed with caution in the event of a near-miss; green is coupled with a count of successful safe days worked).

**Personalizing safety**

Safety personalization campaigns, an important part of strong safety cultures, target your most serious hazards, based on audit findings (some facility safety identification companies conduct surveys for customers), anecdotal observations, incident recordkeeping, near-miss reporting, and other analytics. Customized signage using a company’s own messaging and graphics can identify lifting and material handling dangers; slips, trips and falls; hand and arm hazards; eye hazards; noise exposures; chemical exposures; confined spaces; machinery that requires lockout-tagout protocols; arc flash exposure potential; and electrical, welding, construction, traffic and combustible dust hazards.

Clear, concise, visible instructions, updates, warnings, alerts and compliance requirements can be personalized in numerous ways. Photographs of employees, their family members, even pets, Harley motorcycles, motor boats, work teams, company picnics and safety fairs, combined with company logos, icons and slogans are the connective tissue that holds together a culture of personalized safety. Personalization can be tailored to specific work environments, such as construction sites, the oil and gas industry, refining and processing, manufacturing, offices, loading docks, warehouses, and retail outlets. Here’s one scenario: On a monthly or quarterly basis, different team members and front office personnel have the opportunity to publicly post their reasons why they work safely. It’s a matter of personal ownership and pride. And it creates excitement. Who’s up next? Which employee’s message will be recognized, perhaps framed and later given to the employee to take home.

Personalization reflects the values of employees, management, company brands, and company traditions. The professional execution of signs, markers, tags, banners and posters becomes key to establishing the credibility of safety as a personal value.

The personalization of safety has many attributes beyond hazard identification. Communications to employees can focus on the need for constant vigilance and awareness, ,mindfulness, the importance of near miss reporting, reminders that families and team members depend on every employee staying safe on the job – “Others are counting on you.” Personalization can also reinforce safety goals such as zero incidents through the deployment of posters, electronic messaging and automated scoreboards. Any number of customized communication tools reinforce the importance of on and off the job safety and healthy lifestyles. An added benefit: safety becomes the “sixth S” in 5 S programs.

**5 S programs and safety**

5 S programs can indispensable to safety cultures. Every element in a 5 S program has safety implications. *Sort* removes unnecessary items, clutter and waste from work spaces, reducing the chances of slips, trips and falls. *Set* keeps important tools and materials nearby, reducing shortcuts and unnecessary movements. *Shine* keeps work spaces clean, hygienic, and free from contaminants. *Standardize* brings consistency and reliability to how work is organized and work flows, reducing error traps and at-risk behavior. *Sustain* creates awareness of the big picture – that workplace efficiency, organization, cleanliness, standardization and safety are all long-term processes that depend on individual ownership, accountability and responsibility. 5 S success depends on internalizing and personalizing the principles of *Sort*, *Set*, *Shine*, *Standardize* and *Sustain*.

Technology makes the personalization of safety quick, simplified, and it expands the possibilities. Facility safety identification suppliers have creative specialists who can collaborate on customizing any sign, tag, label, banner or poster. Typography and visuals can be produced for almost application imaginable. Companies can FTP their artwork directly to signage manufacturers, or send artwork on CDs or DVDs, or use email. Many artwork files are acceptable, including Adobe Photoshop®, Adobe Illustrator®, Adobe PageMaker®, Adobe InDesign® and QuarkXPress®.

**Challenges to personalizing safety**

Safety and health professionals today face challenges to personalizing safety. According *to Industrial Safety & Hygiene News’* reader survey, 39 percent of pros must handle expanding workloads. Few safety and health departments are adding to headcount – 65 percent say staff levels will remain the same; 27 percent report slight increases; and six percent report staff cuts.

Tight resources can mean leaning on quick fixes and “more of the same.” This can lead to the antithesis of personalized safety – dull, cheap, generic signage and other means of internal messaging and branding that is too easily ignored, disrespected or taken for granted. Tight resources also often result in an all-too-typical slapdash, piecemeal approach to safety, with signs, visual cues, and communications lacking standardization, professionalism – and credibility.

Another challenge to personalizing safety: companies constantly “rebrand,” reposition or reinvent their safety programs. The catalyst can be the arrival of a new safety director, a new plant manager, a new safety steering committee, new standards, new ownership, deteriorating injury rates, or too often, a serious injury or fatality and the subsequent public relations damage. The result: employees cynically, skeptically participate in another safety kick-off rally, listen to another executive voice platitudes about safety, attend another town hall meeting, repeat old pledges, read rewritten memos, and deal with amped up enforcement. “Program of the month” fatigue sets in. So does dissatisfaction with obviously recycled ideas and tactics. It’s like watching televised reruns. Employees withdraw, disengage, and lose respect for the company and the brand. Data from Lippincott indicates fewer than 50 percent of employees believe in the company’s brand idea. Why? Too many poorly planned and poorly delivered internal branding efforts.

Personalized safety, when it is executed creatively and with the aid of technology, allows signage, posters, banners, projections, tags, floor markings, three-dimensional message displays, unique items such as a transparent one-way printed welding screen, even work site street signs to be silent partners for safety and health pros. These silent partners are touch points for safety, flexible, changeable, and work 24/7/365.

**Is personalizing effective?**

Finally, companies want to measure the effectiveness of their efforts to personalize safety.

How?

Measuring injury and illness rates is the traditional tool. Have rates gone up or down or remain flat? Too many variables influence recordkeeping, including under-reporting, to make it a meaningful barometer. Reductions in workers’ compensation costs can be looked at, but this too is a lagging indicator that will take time to register.

Better measures are proactive, not reactive. Indicators of positive results of a campaign to personalize safety include: 1) increases in near-miss reporting; 2) employees speaking up about hazardous conditions; 3) increases in peer-to-peer safety observations and conversations; 4) increases in the number of hazards found and fixed through regular auditing; and 5) increases in staff retention rates. Anonymous employee perception surveys can be used to chart improvements in safety knowledge, awareness, at-risk behavior interventions (actively caring), and trust in senior leadership’s personal and continuing investment in safety.

These positive outcomes are the benefits of personalizing safety. Employees are engaged, motivated, and focused. They understand that their personal responsibilities for safety extend to their families, their coworkers, and their off-the-job activities. The result is a paradigm shift, a much more deeply rooted culture of safety than mere compliance with OSHA standards.