

# **Safety Culture: At the Crux of a Great Business**

by

**Gregory P. Sipes, Ph.D., Sc.D.**

Fix the broken windows in the vacant houses in a rough neighborhood and watch the level of vandalism in that neighborhood drop. Each night paint over the graffiti on the New York subway cars and observe as the crime rate in the subways decreases. Incorporate safety as a value in the workplace culture and watch product quality, customer satisfaction, productivity and profitability increase. All of these statements, as unlikely as they seem, have been shown to be true.

I made a new friend the other day. His name is Paul and it was an unexpectedly enlightening experience. Paul taught me about the fundamental importance of workplace safety emanating from what he called a “safety culture.” An effective safety culture has safe conditions and safety behavior as a core value. It’s not safety as a priority. Priorities change. Values are fixed. They are lived. Values are the lens through which we see our priorities. Values are closer to the heart. Values determine what you do when no one is watching.

When safety is a value of the work culture it permeates everything and everybody on the job and the safety culture must, therefore, follow the employee home. Gone are the days of “balance between work and home.” Today’s emphasis in lifestyle is integration. That is, consistent values and behavior at home and at work. Therefore, safety becomes a way of life for the employee. They see the world differently.

Paul further educated me on five critical aspects of project management: cost control, schedule control (finishing on time), product quality (as defined by the customer), customer satisfaction and, of course, safety. Safety culture contributes to all five. I pushed Paul for an explanation of the variable that would account for this effect. He says it is operational discipline. An effective safety culture is present only in a disciplined workplace where awareness of safety accentuates attentiveness to all critical aspects of the project. The management skill set required to manage safety is the same set needed to manage everything else on the project. Safety culture is therefore quality culture.

The cost savings of a safety culture are well documented. The savings in insurance premiums, lost worker time, workman’s compensations, medical expenses, legal expenses and more are compelling reasons to see safety as a “good business” decision. But consider that it does more than save money. It also increases customer satisfaction, productivity and ultimately profitability.

For safety to be a core value there has to be a companion core value and that is caring for those you work with. Oh sure, there are compelling financial incentives for safety but the psychologist in me says that there is higher order thinking here. That higher order is recognizing that caring about employees safety is not only “doing things right” but it is “the right thing to do.” And there is ample evidence that those companies that are

considerate of their employees have greater employee satisfaction, the leading variable for customer satisfaction. These companies are as much as 40% more productive and 50% more profitable than their competition. And that's across industries and regardless of economic conditions.

So my enlightenment is that an effective safety culture results in a disciplined, highly efficient, organization with high quality products and services delivered on time, to satisfied customers. Further, there are tremendous cost savings not to mention that the safety culture is a caring culture where employees feel valued and as a result are more productive. All of this drops to the bottom line meaning significantly greater profitability. Safety culture is "at the crux of a great business."

What is the first step? Paul talked of "dripping safety on people, frequently and in short bursts." Frequent safety messages because we need repeated exposure to an idea before it affects our behavior and in "short bursts" because our attention span requires conciseness. Frequent, concise messages gradually shift the workplace culture, and safety becomes a part of everything that everyone does.

So why wouldn't any and every organization insist on reconsidering their corporate culture and insure safety permeates all that is done every day? It's the "knowing-doing" gap and it is baffling to those of us who study human behavior. We often don't do what we know is best. But look at your industry. Those who consistently thrive have a common theme. They care about the safety of their most valuable asset, their people. Since meeting Paul I expect I'll never see the workplace quite the same.

Paul J. Logan retired from DuPont after 36 years, is now Manager-Engineering-Capital Project Administration with Eli Lilly & Company and a board member of Metro Indianapolis Coalition for Construction Safety (MICCS). Dr. Sipes is a clinical psychologist and senior partner of Indiana Health Group a multidisciplinary behavioral health firm and founder of nextVoice, a company committed to helping others have better relationships for business and for life. He is the author of *Lead as You Live, Live as You Lead: Discovering the Six Principles of Uncommon Sense for Uncommon Success*. For more information about the book or to contact Dr. Sipes about speaking to your company, please contact Carrie Jackson at 317-933-3518 or [carrie@drgregsipes.com](mailto:carrie@drgregsipes.com)