



## A CULTURE OF SAFETY: CHALLENGING TO BUILD, EASY TO UNDERMINE

Following an injury-causing incident, owners/heads of companies often ask: “Why did that person think what they did was the right thing to do? Don’t they know that safety is first here and they have the right to refuse unsafe work?” There can be frustration that posted policies, safety meetings, and a genuine culture of caring for people has insufficient impact on a high number of injuries.

The best companies at reducing injuries have realized that it’s not what you see in the big meetings or on the poster on the wall, it’s how leaders and owners handle themselves on the small things dozens of times a day, day after day that really sets the way things are done. Statistically, 95 per cent of incidents are caused

by human behaviour and 85 per cent of that behaviour is caused by what people believe leadership wants as signaled by their everyday actions.

An example: a faller may know that he has the right to refuse unsafe work. However, when a faller asks for a danger tree to be blasted and he hears back: “Really? That’s a pain. It will take time. Maybe I should get another faller...but if you really insist...then I’ll see what I can do.” Then the reality of the faller’s world is you get rewarded for taking the risk, not stopping the work. The supervisor may take that position because in their world, their manager asks if the volume required for the week is going to be ready, without ever discussing if getting the volume is putting anyone at

risk. The manager may know that safety is first in the company, but if the manager’s measures don’t include progress on injury reduction, but are heavy on cost and volume, then their reality is cost and volume.

The challenge is that the messaging is subtle. Consider “you have the right to refuse unsafe work” and “you have an obligation to refuse unsafe work.” One implies you have the right, but better be ready to prove it. While the other implies you need to stop when you or others are at risk to take the right steps to get the job done without injury. There is a difference too in what it means management will do. To a lot of people “right to refuse unsafe work” means management will question if it was the right

**UPDATED**

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call, while “obligation to refuse unsafe work” means management will back you up, and be upset if you don’t. If leaders respond by questioning the call—the policy is really “right to refuse, but be questioned.” But when leaders back it up and support the stoppage, the reality is “obligation to refuse and solve the issue before injury”.

three point contact; why didn’t she use the working alone procedure; why did he operate when he wasn’t trained?” In a surprising number of investigations, the reason given is because people “know” that the standards are “really guidelines” and if you have been around for a bit, you can use them or not. This is often shocking to the owner/leader, but

people understand that standards “aren’t standards” but actually guidelines that can be bent to get things done, then a serious incident can occur in something unrelated to what the owner/leader does. For example, the standard may be to lock out mobile equipment. But a person believes that if it is just for a minute, they can get under the truck without locking it out. (This recently resulted in a fatality in a trucking company when someone drove the truck away.) Literally hundreds of substandard actions can result from people acting as they “believe” leadership would want them to act, based on a relatively small number of actions of leadership violating their own policies. If you create standards, stand by them, always, through every action. After all, what is culture? It is the practices people do based on what they believe leadership actually wants shown by the values leadership demonstrates through their own actions.▲

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## Consider the difference: “you have the right to refuse unsafe work” or “you have an obligation to refuse unsafe work.”

Owners and leaders send signals all the time through their small actions. Do they use three point contact, do they follow the “Keep 100 meters away” from equipment that has it painted on, do they use their PPE (personal protective equipment), do they work with the crew on redoing the plan and communicating it well when something changes, do they drive recklessly with other people in their own vehicle?

An issue for many owners and leaders has been where an incident has occurred when an employee has not followed a set standard. “Why didn’t he use

what comes next is even more shocking. People say they believe this based on the behaviour of the owner or leader or their supervision. This belief comes from small actions they have seen. The owner may regularly pull front forward into a parking space when the policy is to back in, “because he is just there for a minute.” The owner may have asked an untrained person to run a loader for a short time, but it was OK “while he was there.” The owner may have commented he got the pilot to fly “when the weather was poor.”

The unfortunate part is that once



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