A Progressive Approach to Safety – SS SSC



To paraphrase *Fortune* magazine, the flattened network organization has changed the style of command and control. Collaboration is in. Managers and workers have to practice cooperation and collaboration. A direct quote from the magazine: “The environment increasingly encourages this collaboration by the devolution of power and delegation of duties, right down to the empowered, self-managed worker.” I’d like to talk a bit more about empowerment from the perspective of health and safety.

The Essence of Empowerment

That same *Fortune* magazine article makes the following observations on empowerment: “The essence of the idea is simple. Organize employees into teams that can cut across old boundaries. Train them. Put them into jobs that challenge their abilities. Give them the information they need. Tell them what they need to accomplish. Then turn them loose. Self-directed teams make decisions, set their own goals, and take responsibility.”

We should think about these observations and picture them in effect within the context of our health and safety programs. How do they challenge our conventional thinking about safety programs and the role of safety professionals? What are some of the impediments to an empowered workforce from a health and safety point of view?

What’s Holding Back the Empowerment of Safety Professionals?

Many businesses are still struggling to define a clear role for their safety staff. Within the conventional safety program, rules and regulations are the responsibility of a head office safety person. This individual’s role includes enforcement of safety policies and procedures.

That sounds like a formidable position. But the safety officer’s position is essentially one of *perceived* power, I believe. The position has no real power. In point of fact, it’s actually the most powerless position in the organization. Just as quickly as the safety person takes credit for improved safety performance, he or she is saddled with responsibility when safety performance doesn’t improve. It is at this point where most safety officers jump off the bandwagon.

Changing the Approach

Consider the differences between a traditional and modern safety program:

Traditional safety program characteristics:

- A central, head office individual with responsibility for corporate safety;
- A team of safety specialist on staff, or one local staff safety specialist;
- Safety is deemed to be a staff function with a manager responsible for safety and a supporting staff reporting to that manager;
- Rules, standards and regulations developed and prescribed by management; and
- Little line commitment, ownership, responsibility or accountability for safety, and minimal involvement in accident prevention or safety management issues.

Characteristics of more progressive approaches to safety:

- Workers and work teams take responsibility for accident prevention initiatives and safety performance improvements;
- Staff safety specialist employed as a safety coordinator and support function;
- Increased emphasis on total communication with all stakeholders;
- Executive and senior management provide strategic leadership for safety strategy. Content and initiatives left to workers and work teams; and
- Total integration of safety performance into all job responsibilities and accountabilities.

Conclusion

My recommendation: Each of us should consider the differences between the conventional and progressive approach and determine which one offers the greatest potential for improving safety performance. Which approach’s style best reflects you and your business? Which one would you rather be part of?