Time to Get Fired Up About Occupational Safety & Health (Again)

Paul Schuberg, Sr. Risk Specialist, City of Portland

March 8th, 2010

The other day my fellow employee got a nasty burn on his foot while draining a boiler from a splash that entered his boot. He was treated and released for a 2nd degree burn. While relieved that he was OK and satisfied in determining causation factors to prevent this from happening again, it made me reflect on the state of safety in today’s workplace environments.

The good news for many employers is that occupational injuries and illnesses have seen a downward trend over the last few years. This is due in part to motivated safety efforts along with specific technologies that have reduced or eliminated many labor intensive tasks. It may also be attributed to an increased focus on health and safety education, resulting in an awareness of workplace hazards and how to avoid them.

When I began in this profession in the early 80’s, workplace safety and health was in large part a response to following OSHA rules, with injuries left to workers compensation carriers. For example, if “Bill” threw his back out lifting a pile of bricks, no problem. Insurance would pay for his medical treatment, hot tub therapy and time spent at home in front of the tube until he was ready to come back to work.

This all came to a head by decades’ end when out-of-control workers compensation rates threatened businesses all across the state. Governor Goldschmidt’s Mahonia Hall discussions in 1990 resulted in major insurance and safety and health reform. Safety committees and other activities were mandated. Businesses became proactive and safety successes were celebrated. Promoting safety was a big deal. It made good business sense and had a cozy “kumbaya” feel to it.

By the turn of the millennium, Safety and Health was still front stage in our booming economy. This was particularly true in the construction trades that witnessed declining fatalities and owners who really bought into the safety-is-good business model. They still do. They can’t afford to let skilled and productive people get hurt.

In this current climate of uncertainty and change at all levels of our society, the greatest challenge for employers may well be to guard against “health and safety complacency” and thereby avoid losing the cost-reducing, life-saving gains which have been made.

At greatest risk are general industries that have had meaningful safety programs and may be inclined to “taper off” safety and health training from budgetary concerns. They may also assume, as a result of previous awards or meritorious recognition in their industry, that they have “arrived” in a virtual safe place.

My experience has convinced me that the more management (and their workforce) is involved in safety efforts such as inspections, audits, training and incident investigations, the better the safety culture. I’ve also witnessed that a safety program either gets better or it becomes worse. Safety programs cannot remain static. It reminds me of a sign in an old forlorn locker room that I’ll never forget: “If what you did yesterday still looks good, you haven’t done much today”.

When safety and health is functioning at its highest level, the responsibility for a strong safety culture must belong to the management team that controls both the resources and the workers necessary for production of goods and services. Endless budgetary and new- program meetings must not obscure this fundamental duty for those in charge.

In spite of new challenges and difficulties, now is not the time to be complacent regarding safety and health. An organization or work group that fails to recognize this reality of business management will get burned. Get and stay fired up.