The Importance of Voluntary Programs

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Over the years, I have observed that most companies operate under a “command and control” approach where production and quality is managed fairly well, and compliance with standards is strived for. The goal is to be “in compliance” with various mandatory standards, (i.e., environmental, security or health and safety) while producing a quality product at a profit. These companies tend to have widely varying degrees of success or failure following this model.

It is my observation and belief that the development and implementation of occupational health and safety management systems is vital to success of any business. There are many models available, and most of them are voluntary consensus standards as opposed to mandatory standards. Two of those voluntary occupational safety and health management models are the OSHA Voluntary Protection Programs (VPP) and the Safety and Health Achievement Recognition Program (SHARP).

While it is not “mandated,” developing, implementing, and following an occupational safety and health management system is simply smart business. Such a system can help a company ensure ongoing success in managing environmental, health and safety compliance while they continue to produce a quality product.

It is also my observation and belief that compliance with regulations alone will not protect employees as effectively as a proactive safety and health management system that involves employees. While compliance with the rules is vital to the success of any company, the OSHA rules and regulations are, after all, minimum standards. Those companies that want to be more than simply “compliant” are looking for means and methods in which they can take their safety programs to the next level. **Voluntary compliance programs provide those companies with direction or guidance necessary to** **take their safety performance to a higher level**.

The philosophy behind voluntary programs is to encourage companies to go above and beyond compliance with the rules and learn to more effectively manage their own occupational safety and health programs. Voluntary programs have shown companies, through their successes, that safety and health improvement can translate into more efficient processes, improved employee morale, more productive workers, better product quality, and a stronger sense of workforce ownership of safety and health processes.

One of the things that make voluntary programs so effective is that the companies WANT to do the things that will help them to be more successful. They are not forced into doing it. They do these things not because they are easy, but because they believe it is possible to take their safety systems to a more efficient level. The companies that participate in these programs understand the importance of compliance with the rules, but also understand there must be more to it, and they are looking to find ways to make their safety systems better.

Proactive companies voluntarily improve their safety and health management systems by incorporating certain elements into those systems. These companies strive for continuous improvement of their safety and health management systems in order to move them through a continuum toward self sufficiency. The voluntary programs have shown that when businesses are educated and coached to more effectively manage their own workplace safety and health programs, they will come to a point where employees and management work together to make safe production and continuous improvement part of their culture.

One of the most important aspects of the voluntary programs, and the cornerstone of their success, is that they require meaningful employee involvement. The OSHA Voluntary Protection Program (VPP) and their Safety and Health Achievement Recognition Program (SHARP) require that all employees, from hourly personnel to senior management, have a voice and participation in their safety programs.

The voluntary programs have **encouraged and helped** many companies to actively involve employees in workplace safety and health, to the point where such safety programs no longer belong to management, they belong to and are driven by all employees at the worksite, effectively giving those companies safety people at all levels of the organization.

Are companies in the voluntary programs perfect? Absolutely not, but they are actively working toward becoming safer, more efficient and more profitable. They are showing other companies that safety and health can be managed effectively and profitably. They lead by their example.

I have been fortunate enough to have been associated with many companies participating in the Voluntary Protection Program. Over that association, I have witnessed significant and phenomenal growth in companies that choose to pursue SHARP and/or VPP status. The Voluntary Compliance Programs provide these companies with proven roadmaps and guidance so they can transform haphazard safety and health management systems into exemplary programs.

The VPP companies provide real benefit to OSHA. The benefits are in the form of mentoring and outreach activities with other sites and with local communities. The VPP sites expect all companies contracting with them to step up to their level of safety protection, then provide other companies with assistance to help them achieve success as well. This mentoring, networking and contracting causes other, non-VPP facilities to improve their own safety programs in a grass root sort of way, from the ground up.

I strongly believe that safety and health in the workplace requires the careful balance of both enforcement methods and cooperative programs. The OSHA enforcement model works well for employers who are trying to get by with minimal efforts. That model will never get our nation’s workplaces to the levels of health and safety we need. Those companies that want to do the right thing and protect their employees NEED to have a model and an example they can follow. Since 1982, the VPP has been that model.

The current administration and leadership within federal OSHA have determined the course of action is to bring back a strong enforcement element, and policy is being made to move in that direction. Strong enforcement is a good thing, but not when the trade-off is a weakening of the very successful Voluntary Compliance programs. The Voluntary Compliance Programs add value to workplace safety and health by encouraging worksites to go beyond mere compliance.