Core Practices: Is Health and Wellness a Part of Your Safety Process?

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Shortchanging good health practices in your workplace can have a dramatic impact not only on employees' health and well-being, but on their safety and productivity as well.

People-watching is a favorite pastime of many, including myself and an associate I was talking to in the exhibit hall at a recent national safety conference. As we stood chatting about the latest in safety, health and environmental issues, we couldn't help but notice that so many of the attendees did not appear to be physically fit. Many people were overweight and out of shape. As we walked and talked, we observed quite a few people quickly exiting the building to have a cigarette. Attendees, huddled around tables at the food concessions, consumed large quantities of foods high in fats, sugar and artificial ingredients.

Our conversation shifted to an inquiry, not out of judgments of right or wrong but out of our mutual concern, regarding why this condition existed to such a great degree with people in general, not to mention people dealing in safety and incident prevention. Here we were at a conference where people came from a multitude of geographical areas and industries, hungry to find out what more could be done to prevent accidents and resulting injuries, yet showed little awareness of how their health and well-being was being affected by their attitudes and patterns of behavior.

Are health and wellness issues even a part of our safety meetings, discussions and strategy sessions, or are they omitted in lieu of conversations about the nuts and bolts of PPE, proper procedures, and the like?

Often, we have found that when people think of safety, they only think of not getting hurt in a minor or major way, such as avoiding cuts, burns, broken bones or strains and sprains. Though important, it is not the complete picture.

The word "safety" means "free from danger, injury or harm." This, of course, includes the prevention of accidents and environmental incidents that can cause immediate types of injuries that result in cuts, burns, broken bones, strains or even deaths. Many of the same actions (or inactions) that cause these types of injuries can, and do, cause health problems. They may be a result of what we breathe, ingest or absorb through our air, water, food or other exposures. A major difference is that most of the health and wellness problems are longer term and many individual line and management employees, as well as corporate leaders, tend to be short-term, immediate consequence-oriented. They may not choose to recognize the longer-term implications of our decisions and actions, and how they relate to our health and well-being.

Many of the attitudes and beliefs that cause health concerns relate to personal behaviors, including the provision and use of proper personal protective equipment (PPE), implementing and following proper safeguards and procedures, and doing complete work. They also relate to production and financial pressures from leadership, and their willingness to be future and strategically focused rather than present time and tactically focused.

The attitudes and behaviors of all levels of line and management employees greatly affect the health and well-being of not just company employees, but the citizens of our planet. Health and wellness, as a consequence of the actions of our world's industries and their employees, are impacted on a moment-to-moment basis. This includes the health and well-being of our current generation and the generations to come.

Education and training are needed to further raise awareness and provide the knowledge and skills that will help shape the attitudes, thinking and behaviors that will result in personal and global health and well-being. Do companies today focus on this essential aspect of safety, health and environmental excellence, as well as inquire how they can make a greater difference for the health and well-being of their employees and our global citizens? Some do! Many don't! Is your company taking initiative to ensure that their strategies and actions are preventive in nature when it comes to the health issues that affect us all? Or are they being reactionary and only taking action in response to some negative consequence, such as an incident or a regulatory or legal action against them? If the latter is the case, then what are the attitudes and thinking that allow this to exist?

Justifying the Wrong Behavior

The discussion my associate and I were having caused me to reflect back to my youth at about nine years old. I remembered taking one of my father's Old Gold Straights, going down to the bathroom in our unfinished basement, standing on an old box and looking at myself in the cracked mirror on the wall, puffing on the cigarette, and blowing the smoke out the window. I felt very "cool" and grown up, like my father or one of that era's movie stars.

Though coughing and feeling dizzy weren't the most pleasant of experiences, the image it gave me and how it made me feel—grown up, cool and sophisticated—made it all worthwhile.

This started a pattern of behavior for the next 36 years of smoking unfiltered cigarettes, even though there was sufficient evidence to convince me to do otherwise. How could a person justify smoking cigarettes, especially after seeing his grandfather, father and uncles, all heavy smokers, suffer and eventually die of lung cancer, emphysema and heart disease? Even while consuming a diet of organic and healthy foods, working out regularly at the gym and jogging? One might think that that would be enough to prevent anyone from taking on this habit.

Well, the human mind can justify just about any behavior, and my mind wasn't any different. The very fact that healthy eating and exercise were a regular part of my daily activities contributed to my rationalization of continuing to smoke. "Well, I eat well and exercise, so that will counteract any negative effects of smoking." This belief was just another form of saying, "It won't happen to me," the primary belief that drives the unsafe behaviors of most men and women. The more jogging and the more working out, the more the rationalization could support the unsafe and unhealthy behavior.

When men and women take shortcuts or bypass procedures, they knowingly or unknowingly put themselves and others at risk of an immediate injury. They do this even though minor cuts and burns hurt!

Sprained ankles or broken bones not only hurt but debilitate as well. "It won't happen to me" is very powerful!

What about behaviors such as not wearing respirators, gloves or protective garments? What happens when people breathe in fumes, or chemicals are absorbed through their skin? What are they thinking when their behavior does not result in an immediate pain or negative consequence? What beliefs get reinforced and result in the repetition of those behaviors?

Some years back, while on a tour of a worksite for a plastics manufacturer, we observed a worker without a respirator standing over a processing vat dumping a bag of powder that was an ingredient in their process. The air was filled with particulates from the bag, and the worker was completely enveloped in them as he was carrying out his activities. There was no way this person could avoid breathing in a fair amount of the powder. Most likely, this was not the first time he did this. It was clear he didn't think that anything negative would happen to him, and he was able to justify the behavior. My thoughts also went to the managers, supervisors and co-workers that most likely observed him in previous occurrences and never said anything to him. "It won't happen to me" gets translated to, "It won't happen to him or her."

Out of Focus?

So, how does our health affect our ability to keep ourselves and others safe? A major factor in safety has to do with our ability to focus and pay attention to what we are doing in the moment. It also has to do with our ability to respond immediately and effectively when something out of the ordinary or a danger is present. When people's health is affected by an illness or condition, such as low- or high-blood pressure, low-blood sugar, emphysema or other respiratory diseases, heart disease or arthritis, their ability to focus and pay attention may be diminished from the effects of the illness and/or medications they are taking.

Anxiety and depression from stress or other emotional conditions create distractions, loss of energy and diminished response time. Stress levels are higher than ever today, and the negative effects are tremendous. Legal and illegal drugs that many use as a coping mechanism also diminish our capabilities. Each person's health and level of well-being has an effect on their level of awareness and vitality, as well as their ability to concentrate, focus, stay in balance, sustain energy levels, and basically do what they need to protect themselves and others.

If we were athletes ready to perform in a sports event or competition, we would ask ourselves what our optimum condition needs to be in order to perform in an outstanding way. What condition would we need to be in to maintain our strength, energy levels, mobility, flexibility, and so on? Interestingly, the jobs that many workers perform often require a more sustained energy level and focus time than that of many athletes.

In asking ourselves what can be done, the following perspectives, strategies and actions are essential for the our overall well-being, as well as that of our co-workers, families and members of our communities:

1. Educate all levels of corporate and site employees, as well as our communities, regarding any negative health and environmental effects from manufacturing processes.

2. Prevent, reduce or minimize harmful by-products of processes, as well as prevent stressors that affect employees:

• Provide resources to minimize the various sources of health problems, including stress, and improve workplace conditions or environment. Reduce high levels of noise, as well as dust, fumes and bad air from poor ventilation; replace old, unsafe and malfunctioning equipment; eliminate crowded work areas.

• Hire outplacement services or counseling when downsizing or going through other organizational changes to help people cope with their circumstances, as well as gain confidence in their ability to handle the situation and reduce stress.

• Insure the most effective pollution controls and disposal methods are in place. Don't allow the justification that they are too expensive to prevent this investment. As Philip Crosby said regarding quality, the cost of not implementing them is far costlier than the cost of investing in them.

3. Involve employees at all levels in identifying and solving unsafe and unhealthy situations, conditions and issues to help reduce their ill effects and the stress that these situations cause. Of course, make them safe, healthy, and workable.

4. Provide effective leadership, management and, interactive skills to eliminate poor communication, threats, and ineffective handling of reporting of health issues and concerns, including accidents and incidents. Stress levels can build to high levels with increasing concerns over possible consequences to reporting health or safety incidents and cause non-reporting to occur.

5. Insure incentive systems intended to increase productivity or prevent accidents, injuries and health/environmental incidents are not actually causing rushing and increased levels of fear and stress. Real or perceived pressures from oneself or others to rush to produce or to meet a numerical goal (even safety goals) can create situations where serious incidents can occur.

6. Train accident and incident investigation teams in coaching and counseling methods to insure constructive, educational interactions. Improperly handled incident investigations can negatively impact a person's sense of well-being.

7. Take the initiative, as management and labor leadership, to proactively address the causes of various health and wellness issues:

    • Correct workplace conditions and environments.
    • Learn skills to communicate and interact constructively with all employees.
    • Make continual improvements in identified and needed areas.
    • Provide needed resources for training and improvements.
    • Give people the ability to be healthy, safe and make corrections that will support themselves and others.

8. Provide people with classes for needed skills and techniques to manage, reduce, and prevent stress buildup and health or problems related to wellness. These can include:

    • Stress reduction and relaxation
    • Physical fitness
    • Nutrition
    • Time management and goal setting
    • Personal and team management

- Assertiveness training and constructive communication

Remembering that safety means to be free from danger, injury or harm, health and wellness are essential components in an organization's efforts to maintain the highest levels of safety. Necessary resources must be provided to educate everyone affected and implement the strategies to effectively address health and wellness issues. Anything less would not allow for a total safety effort.

Healthy Eating for Adults

Here are tips for eating healthy as an adult:

- Eat breakfast every day. People who eat breakfast are less likely to overeat later in the day.

- Choose whole grains more often. Try whole wheat breads and pastas, oatmeal, brown rice or bulgur.

- Select a mix of colorful vegetables each day. Different colored vegetables provide necessary nutrients and contribute to our health.

- Have low-fat, low-sugar snacks on hand at home, at work or on the go, to combat hunger and prevent overeating.

- Eat three meals every day instead of skipping meals or eating a snack instead of a meal.

- Drink plenty of water. Aim for about eight, 8-ounce glasses each day.

- At restaurants, eat only half your meal and take the rest home.

- Visit museums, the zoo or an aquarium. You and your family will walk for hours and not realize it.

- Take a walk after dinner instead of watching TV.

- Get plenty of sleep.

Source: National Institute of Diabetes & Digestive & Kidney Diseases

Physically Fit Tips to Get You Started

Here are some tips to get you started on the path to daily exercise:

1. Check with your doctor first. Since you or someone you care about may be carrying around some extra "baggage," it is wise to get your doctor's "OK" before embarking on an exercise program.
2. Choose activities that you think you'll enjoy. Most people will stick to their exercise program if they are having fun, even though they are working hard.
3. Set aside a regular exercise time. Whether this means joining an exercise class or getting up a little earlier every day, make time for this addition to your routine, and don't let anything get in your way. Planning ahead will help you get around interruptions in your workout schedule, such as bad weather and vacations.

4. Set short-term goals. Don't expect to lose 20 pounds in two weeks. It has taken awhile for you to gain the weight or get into your current physical condition, it will take time to lose it or balance out your health. Keep a record of your progress and tell your friends and family about your achievements.
5. Vary your exercise program. Change exercises or invite friends to join you to make your workout more enjoyable. There is no "best" exercise, just the one that works best for you. It won't be easy, especially at the start. But as you begin to feel better, look better and enjoy a new zest for life, you will be rewarded many times over for your efforts.

Source: President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports