

I Changed a Safety Culture and It Nearly Killed Me!

**Ron C. McKinnon, CSP
Safety Manager
Gemini Observatory
Hilo, Hawaii**

Introduction

After having been in the safety profession for more than 30 years, including having lived and practiced safety in Arizona and Zambia, I accepted a 3-year contract as a “Safety Culture Change Agent” at Aluminum Bahrain (Alba) in the Arabian Gulf. I later managed to change the duration of the contract to 2 years.

I had just returned from a contract in Kitwe, Zambia and was prepared for another tough assignment. At the time of the interview I didn’t quite realize what a tough assignment it was going to turn out to be!

The initial interview with the Deputy CEO, Jeremy, went fine and my wife, Maureen, and I found him to be a charming person and someone really keen to make a difference in safety at Alba.

We were flown to Bahrain for further interviews and to be introduced to the executive management. I was introduced to the CEO, Bruce and immediately he wanted to know my opinion on the behaviors that were the cause of Alba’s accidents. I did not agree with him and asked, “What about the unsafe work environment,” at which he was quite taken aback. I thought I had already talked myself out of the job!

After being interviewed by the eight General Managers and Bruce, I was offered a substantial 3-year contract as Manager of Safety, Health and Environment (SHE Manager).

The Situation as It Was

Alba employs more than three thousand employees and is the second largest employer in Bahrain. It has miles of paved access roads and bicycles, contractors and heavy hot metal haulage trucks all share these roads. It also has a massive on-site hospital and 2 power stations, three now since the addition of Line-5.

The first thing that struck me was that all employees were wearing bump caps instead of the correct industrial hardhat. Next I discovered that almost no one on site wore vehicle safety belts or stopped at Stop signs. I then discovered my predecessor had been the head of Plant Protection (Security) and that the safety and security department were one and the same. The temporary acting SHE manager had been told that he would never get the post and had been sidelined. Little did I know that he had been placed in the position by the previous General Manager of the SHE group (Mahmood) who had also been sidelined and who had had the SHE group taken away from him and given to Jeremy.

The entire plant had only 2 full-time safety coordinators and there were some semi-safety coordinators decentralized in the smelter and power station.

Safety in the Safety Department

Safety belonged in the Safety Department at Alba. If you needed safety glasses or safety shoes you went to the Safety Department. All the critical task procedures had to be signed by the Safety Department. They investigated all the accidents and negotiated with the doctors to ensure injured employees were returned to work so as not to spoil the safety record.

The definition of a Lost Time Injury had been changed from one day off of work to three days to better suit the organization! The main focus was the 30 foot high 'safety' board that tallied the number of hours each division had worked since the last injury. I started calling it the 'evil' record because that's what it was. It forced the organization to hide injuries to maintain the record and thus compete with neighboring factories in safety.

Black Sheep

During the first week I stumbled into this massive hall, which was used as a passage to adjacent offices. It was also the safety training room and listened to a safety person give a lecture.

The employees passing through the room created a major disturbance with them all greeting each other and having a passing chat while they passed through.

The lecture was about what happens to you if you are injured at Alba. One of the first things that shocked me was that the lecturer stated that the injured:

- Could be listed as a 'black sheep' by his fellow workers
- That his chances of promotion were slight
- That the perpetrator could receive a 'warning letter'
- Could be excluded from training
- And a myriad of disastrous events could...

After that lecture I decided that even if I were injured at work I would not tell anyone!

One of my first moves was to convert this hall into 2 safety-training rooms with all the necessary equipment. We had a formal opening and invited the executive team to have lunch with, and meet, the Safety Department Team.

Culture Change

Immediately I became the Deputy CEO's (Jeremy) greatest nightmare because I started working to change the culture and implement a world's best safety system and little did I realize he did not want to rock the boat because of the political climate between Mahmood and himself.

Very enthusiastic I worked all weekend and sent Jeremy a proposal for the re-structuring of the SHE Department. That nearly drove him crazy because I proposed the appointment of 9 new decentralized safety staff at Superintendent level (which was unheard of at Alba) and the appointment of 3 additional centralized staff.

I also proposed a position of 'shadow manager' to enable me to develop and train a local person to take over as SHE manager at the end of my tenure. To add insult to injury I proposed that the 9 decentralized safety people report directly to each of the 9 General Managers!

That same weekend I got a reply from Jeremy that read, "You must be dreaming! Are you crazy?"

That's when I realized he didn't know what a safety culture change agent was or what he does! He was a lawyer and his safety knowledge was limited to defense in a work fatality trial.

That was the first time I wanted to resign.

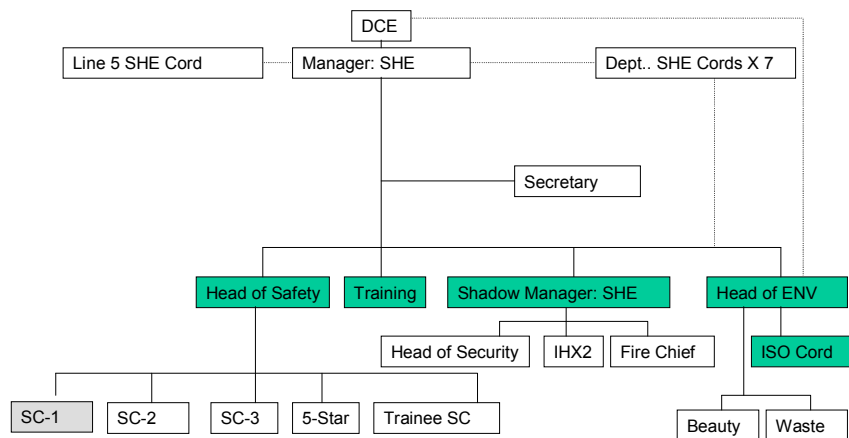


Exhibit 1. This was my original redesign proposal to Jeremy

Executive Safety Committee

After a few months I managed to form the Executive Safety Committee chaired by the CEO and attended by all the General Managers. A start was made on developing safety standards and policies and the committee reviewed my restructuring proposals.

I managed to obtain an 8-hour slot in the newly started Management Development and Training project and presented my Modern Safety Management courses to line management in this added-on time allocation.

I had also requested to report directly to Bruce and he agreed. Jeremy would attend our weekly meetings as well. Things started to fall into place until I refused to sign all 1,000 plus critical task procedures (JSP's). Safety had always 'approved' them. I read some. They were poor and the critical steps were not even in sequential order. The Executive branded me as not being a team player. I insisted that the policy be changed and that managers sign them as they are familiar with the procedures. The Safety Department is not!

The words that needed changing on the policy to force managers to take on safety responsibility turned the Executive upside down and a decision could not be reached. I instructed a Safety Coordinator to go and review the actual tasks against the procedures and report back to me. He did. He reported that the procedure was outdated and flawed. I went back to the Executive determined to get the policy changed.

The First Fatality

On a Wednesday morning we had the first fatal accident when an elderly employee fell some 12 feet to his death after lying down on a walkway rampart. He had refused to go for medical help when he had started to feel faint as he was afraid he would lose his "summer attendance bonus." He lay down on this 12 foot-high ledge and somehow rolled off and plunged to his death.

This shook the organization and Bruce, when asked if I could be of any help, with tears in his eyes, simply replied, "I'm devastated."

I too started to take stress - what with the legal enquiry and talk of prosecution of certain managers for the fatality and the Government's inspector's statement that "The Safety Department have not been doing their job and have no authority..." I couldn't sleep at night and had severe anxiety attacks.

Things got back to normal for a while and we made some safety progress until the second fatality exactly a week later.

The Second Fatality

I was on site immediately after a young man had his head crushed between a moving gantry crane and 3 of the concrete building columns, which left three pools of blood at the base of each pillar

as the crane had traversed the length of the building. It was obviously an accident that could have been prevented and to top it all the man's father was one of the Alba division managers at a site a few miles away.

This time the labor inspector got angry. This time 400 Bahrainis crowded around the main gate and wailed, prayed, and cried as the ambulance with the body of their friend and colleague drove slowly out of the gate while the factory siren wailed in accompaniment. I will never, ever forget that sight in all my life. The local press was also unforgiving about the two deaths that Alba had experienced. They featured on the front page of that evening's paper.

The Safety Committee

According to Bahraini labor law each workplace must have a committee established to promote safety and inter alia, investigate serious accidents. When asked by Bruce why we didn't have a committee in place I rummaged through unsigned and unfinished safety system documents that my two expatriate predecessors had left and found a proposal from one of them to form such a committee and a hand written reply from Mahmood that he, "didn't feel it was necessary."

I handed this to Bruce who apparently tore strips off of Mahmood who was aspiring by the way, to become the next CEO.

That sealed my fate as SHE Manager and as far as the implementation of the safety system was concerned! I didn't realize it at the time though.

Snookered

From that moment on Mahmood was very intent on blocking all of my initiatives to improve safety at Alba. He was very influential in the Executive meetings and managed to dissuade the rest of the Executive on a number of safety proposals and innovations I needed their support on.

At presentations he always questioned my motives and openly challenged me. The rest of the Executive were scared to stand up against him or to support me so he bullied us all.

The Showdown

At one Safety Executive meeting, chaired by Jeremy while Bruce was on vacation, Mahmood pushed me to the limit. He blocked every suggestion I made to the committee as well as a proposed project to put more than 2,000 employees through a 4-hour safety training program. This had never happened before and would contribute greatly to our safety system and enlighten the entire workforce as to what safety was and what was expected of them.

After the meeting I asked Mahmood for a minute of his time and when I confronted him as to whether or not he had a problem with me and the way I was running the SHE Department he told me to off out of his office! This made me mad! He told me a second time and this is when I

let rip. “Why don’t you make me!” and I promptly sat myself in one of his office chairs and put my feet up on his desk. I was really mad and it was Showtime!

At this stage everybody in the vicinity was aware of what was going on. Jeremy (who was acting CEO in Bruce’s absence) rushed in, calmed him down and got me out of his office. On exiting, to make matters worse, I gave Mahmood a finger sign to close the conversation.

To help Jeremy save face and to bow to Mahmood’s request of ‘disciplinary action’, I handed in my resignation. This was the second time.

Bruce Saves the Day

Bruce phoned me from Australia where he was on vacation and told me not to make any drastic moves and to hold on until he returned, which I did. By now the stress had got to me and I was experiencing sleepless nights, depression and it felt like a band was tightening around my chest each time I even thought of work.

I was diagnosed with stress and the doctor ordered me to lose weight, exercise more and take up a hobby, all three of which I did successfully. I lost about 25 pounds in a short time, swam 10 lengths of the pool every night and went for long walks over weekends. I also went on a lunch diet of cheese and crackers, a cup of soup and an apple.

Progress

On his return Bruce spoke to Mahmood who afterwards came to see me and we agreed to put the past aside and go forward together in the interests of improving safety at Alba. He recalled the Safety Committee issue and it was only then clear to me why he had snookered me at every turn.

I was taking a lot of stress but I was also developing the safety team that had now grown to 32 in number! Managers were even appointing their own Safety Coordinators and Safety Representatives and I was training then up to internal Accredited Auditor level.

My shadow manager took over from me after I had been there a year and I moved to the Line-5 expansion project where I helped develop the system further until Line-5 was incorporated into the existing Alba. I continued to work closely with the safety team on a daily basis.

Achievements

After two years Alba was awarded an international 4-Star Safety Rating from the National Occupational Safety Association of South Africa. Two auditors spent a week evaluating every element of the safety system, interviewing employees and inspecting the smelter with a fine toothcomb. That same week Alba achieved the never before achievement of working 4 million man-hours without a lost-time injury (based on the new 1-day definition!)

Some of my achievements at Alba were:

- Redesign of Safety Department - Training rooms built - Creation of 12 new positions
- Department renamed and later relocated
- Appointment of Bahrain Shadow Manager SHE - Appointment of 2 Safety trainees
- First Arab female Safety Trainee appointed
- Position charters written, interviews conducted
- SHE Superintendents trained and developed
- Safety Supervisor appointed
- NEBOSH course organized for all Safety staff
- Permits committee formed
- 4 Major safety competitions run
- SHE Executive and 9 General Manager's committees formed
- Union – Safety Department monthly meetings started
- Safety System approval and commitment from Executive
- Safety publicity obtained monthly - External audits arranged - Internal audits conducted
- Legal compliance audit conducted and submitted to the CEO
- Safety Department presentation competition held
- Safety lunches introduced (with CEO, other Safety Departments and outside companies)
- Safety Representatives appointed and trained
- Sent selected safety staff (2) to ASSE - PDC conference in USA
- Sent selected safety staff to conferences/training in Dubai
- All management educated on Modern Safety Management (8-hours)
- Near miss reporting system introduced
- Two Traffic Controllers appointed and trained
- Accident investigation implemented and given to line management
- Seat belt policy and stickers introduced
- Assisted the CEO in drafting the responsibilities and accountabilities documents
- Radar road speed indicator display implemented
- Emergency evacuation drills implemented and scheduled
- At-height rescue team trained and equipped - Emergency response tested
- Fire appliance maintenance person appointed
- New hot work, confined space, permit to work and excavation permits introduced
- New compulsory induction / orientation training started
- Flame resistant uniforms issued to all / advertised / monitored
- Visitor's safety orientation introduced - Alba Toastmaster Club formed
- 75 Safety Standards written and approved by Executive
- Coordinated the implementation of the Standards
- Line 5 staff trained in safety before start up
- Taught 8-hour classes on:
Accident Investigation - Modern Safety Management - Critical Task Procedures - Safety System Inspecting and Auditing - Near miss Reporting - Risk Assessment
- Taught 2, 40-hour Accredited Auditor's courses. Twenty-five internal auditors trained
- International 4-Star rating awarded, 4,000,000 injury-free man-hours achieved
- Occupational Hygienist appointed

- Ergonomic study conducted and action plan drafted
- Mutual aid agreement signed and exercises held
- Contractor Safety Committee formed
- Contractor Safety Coordinator appointed and site inspections conducted
- Conducted weekly executive briefing session
- STAESAFE (Safety Training for Alba Employees project completed – 2,000 employees trained on a 4-hour safety training course
- Line-5 Safety Startup projects makes a new world record for commissioning new pots with no lost-time injuries.

Conclusion

At the end of the 2-year period I could look back with pride at what had been achieved. When asked how I knew there was a change in the safety culture, I pointed to a General Manager driving his company car down one of the smelters roads and said, “See him stopping at the Stop sign, well that’s an indicator that culture has changed here.”

Was it worth it? Yes. I had never experienced such stress in all my life and for the first time my health was threatened by a safety culture change effort.

My advice – be sure you know what safety culture change is all about and be prepared for the stress that it creates. No pain, no gain!