Trust Me! It's Safe!

By LAWRENCE H. "CHIP" DAWSON

My summers during college were spent working at a boat yard in western New York. The job required handling boats in and out of the water, fueling, painting, repairing and cleaning. Cranes, hoists, trucks and tractors provided power. Chemical and mechanical risks were everywhere. The potential for injury was ever-present. It was more than a decade before OSHA, but the company was essentially injury free.

The owner was respected by employees and customers as a man of his word. The staff had fun, worked hard and pulled together. We all knew our roles and counted on the rest of the team. The level of trust was high.

This was my first experience with trust on the job. Despite the inherently unsafe atmosphere at the site, remarkably few problems occurred. Did the positive work environment prevent accidents in a hazardous environment? Did a direct connection exist between trust and safety?

Today, I visit workplaces to help assess the safety and health process and find that the issue of trust across all levels of the organization cannot be avoided. Based on personal observations and those of other safety practitioners, I am convinced that safe behavior rises and falls in tandem with a set of variables that relates specifically to workplace culture and that mutual trust among participating individuals forms the foundation on which any culture develops.

Intuitive knowledge, however, needs the support of research. This article outlines the search for science linking trust and the practice of safety in the context of the workplace culture.

WHAT IS TRUST?

Aubrey Daniels, writing in the language of performance management, says:

> . . . to be trusted all you have to do (consequences) is what you say you are going to do (antecedent). If we tell someone that doing something in a particular way will be easier for them and it's not, we've slightly eroded their trust. If we tell someone if they work harder they will be better off, and they are not, we lose more credibility. If we tell people that they will be promoted, get a raise, get a transfer, head up a project, be on a team, and these things do not come to pass, we destroy trust (33).

In *System Thinkers' View of Leadership,* F. David Pierce cautions that "trust" is often confused with either "affection" or "respect," but adds that both need to be present for true trust to develop. Affection, he says, is at the high end of the statement "the extent to which I believe you care about me and will back me up." Respect is "the extent to which I believe you are competent and capable." Care, back up, competence and capability are all necessary for trust (Pierce 63).

E. Scott Geller reports on research that looked at the dimensions of trust in the workplace and listed the seven "C's" of trust building—communication, caring, candor, consistency, commitment, consensus and character (Geller 16).

"What creates trust, in the end, is the leader's manifest respect for the followers," Jim O'Toole says in *Leading Change* (Peters 1977-141).

HOW IS TRUST LOST?

Any interaction, communication, message, signal or variance from expectations in a relationship carries the potential to diminish trust. In a major survey covering more than 200 companies, Manchester Consulting learned that the quickest ways for executives and managers to lose credibility in the workplace are to:

- act inconsistently in what they say and do (69 percent);
- seek personal gain above shared gain (41 percent);
- withhold information (34 percent);
- lie or tell half-truths (33 percent);
- be closed-minded (29 percent);
- be disrespectful to employees (28 percent);
- withhold support (16 percent);
- break promises (14 percent);
- betray confidences (13 percent) ("How to Gain").

According to this study, building trust takes more than twice the time it takes to destroy it.

An HR Benchmark Group study of 1,108 respondents from 57 organizations found the five top-ranking trust-reducing behaviors to be:

1) Acts more concerned about his/her own welfare than anything else.

2) Sends mixed messages so that one never knows where s/he stands.

3) Avoids taking responsibility for action ("passes the buck" or "drops the ball").

4) Jumps to conclusions without checking facts first.

5) Makes excuses or blames others when things don't work out ("finger pointing") (Bernthal).

This study highlights an important point: behaviors that build trust and reduce trust are not necessarily related. For example, the number one trust builder was "communicates openly and honestly," but "hides information/lies" ranked seventh as a trust reducer. The researchers also found greater agreement on what builds trust (a universal set of variables) as compared to what reduces trust (many reasons).

WHY IS TRUST IMPORTANT?

According to Tom Peters, trust is the single most-important contributor to the maintenance of human relationships. For a business, it can mean the difference between success and failure. In a research experiment, Peters reports that two groups of executives were given identical information about a difficult policy decision. One group was told to expect trusting behavior from each other; the other group was told to expect untrusting behavior.

Even in the hypothetical setting, the trust group made significantly better decisions; was more open with its feelings; experienced greater clarity about group goals; searched for more alternative solutions; had greater levels of mutual influence; and expressed more unity as a management team (Peters 1994, 318).

"The key to a company's success in the next decade," says Edward Marshall, "will be the responsibility its leadership takes in creating a workplace based on trust-building relationships, integrity and collaboration" (Marshall).

Carlton Snow reports, "Without relationships of trust in the workplace, the long-term prosperity of a business entity may be imperiled by resistance to change, a lack of employee ideas about the most efficient changes and sensibilities that reject a strong commitment to workplace solidarity" (Snow).

Daniels adds, "Once trust is established, people will give you the benefit of the doubt if you make a mistake. If you are not trusted, they will not believe you even when you tell the truth" (33).

A study of injured workers and their experiences with the workers' compensation system uncovered an atmosphere riddled with mistrust. Employers trusted employees who reported injuries and illnesses on the job in direct proportion to the visibility of the injury or illness. For example, employees with cuts reported that their employer trusted the report that the incident occurred on the job 93 percent of the time. For back injuries, it was 73 percent of the time. Carpal tunnel syndrome was believed 63 percent of the time, and all illnesses had a trust level of 56 percent.

As for importance, the study reports that an atmosphere of mistrust may contribute to a worker seeking a lawyer in 20 percent of the cases (with 56 percent of those actually retaining one) (Gallup). The study also reported that a trusting relationship between the company and the worker plays an important role in a successful outcome.

WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SHOW?

Much data on trust come from opinion surveys—and it is generally not good news for businesses and those who run them.

In October 1998, Louis Harris asked 1,000 adults, "Would you generally trust each of the following types of people to tell the truth or not?" High on the list of most-trusted are teachers (86 percent positive), followed closely by clergy (85 percent) and doctors (83 percent). An ordinary man/woman scored 71 percent positive. Business leaders scored 49 percent, bracketed between the President (54 percent) and members of Congress (46 percent) (Harris).

A Gallup Poll conducted in November 2000 asked respondents, "Indicate how you would rate the honesty and ethical standards of people in these different fields . . . very high, high, average, low or very low?" Trust depends heavily on these standards. Nurses took the top spot, with 79 percent of respondents rating them very high or high. Business executives tied with building contractors at 23 percent, barely edging past auto mechanics at 22 percent ("Honesty/Ethics").

The Manchester Consulting study found that 75 percent of executives at companies surveyed reported that trust had declined. Only 15 percent said trust had improved. "Trust in corporate America is at a low point," says Manchester Senior VP Lew Stern. "Senior managers must go out of their way to interact, understand,

FIGURE 1

Industries Represented by Participants

Air conditioning equipment
Apple farming
Auto glass fabrication
Auto repair
Automotive sales
Bird supply
Box manufacturing
Ceramic insulators
Chemicals
Computer consulting
Construction
Construction materials
Container packaging
Component manufacturing
Copier manufacturer
Cosmetics
Crane services
Dairy
Daycare facility
Delivery services
Discount retail
Distributor
Drug rehab program
Electrical power generating
Electronic assembly
Electronic communications manufacturing
Electronics manufacturing
Excavating
Farm seed and grass
Farming
Feed mill
Film processing
Filtration plant
Flexible packaging
Flour milling
Food processing
Food services
Glass installation
Glass manufacturing
Gun manufacturing
Haircare products manufacturing
Hardwood lumber
Healthcare
Heating and air conditioning
Hotel operator
Hotel builder
Ice plant
Information services
Injection molding
Insurance
Land surveying
Landscape design
Law enforcement
Lock and hardware manufacturing
Logging
Machine building
Machine shop
Machine tool manufacturing
Manufacturing
Materials converting
Metal fabrication
Nursing home
Office machine manufacturing
Optical manufacturing
Paper manufacturing
Paving
Payroll processing
Pipe manufacturing
Plastics fabrication
Plastics manufacturing
Postal service
Prefabricated homes
Printing
Refrigeration plant
Rehabilitation facility
Retail
Retirement home
Secondary education
Security services
Semiconductor manufacturing
Software production
State government
Tax services
Textiles
Trade show equipment
Tube manufacturing
TV and radio
U.S. Air Force
Vacuum manufacturing
Wine manufacturing
Woodworking
Wrecking

TABLE 1 Participant Data

	Number	% of total	Managers	Staff	Line
Those who believe their organization is better at safety than others in their industry	72	41.9	19	14	39
Those who believe their organization is poorer at safety than others in their industry	100	58.1	19	7	74
TOTAL	172	100	38	21	113

and serve as examples by what they say and do" ("How to Gain").

The American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) for 2000 was seen as good news for OSHA. This survey of workers at companies inspected by OSHA yielded an overall customer satisfaction index score of 70 (0 to 100 scale) and placed OSHA 1.4 points above average for federal agencies surveyed (OSHA). A random sample of 130 members of ASSE and 130 members of the American Industrial Hygiene Assn. (AIHA) garnered the agency a satisfaction index score of 54, a significant improvement from the 1999 score of 51 (ACSI).

The outcome OSHA wanted in satisfied customers was trust. The trust level was measured by two questions in the survey dealing with *reliance* and *confidence.* The cumulative score of 59 was a disappointment for the agency. While reliance on OSHA for information is up, confidence in its ability to ensure workplace safety and health in the future is down (ACSI).

Industrial Safety and Health News surveyed 900 readers (principally safety and health practitioners) for its annual White Paper on safety and health issues and trends. The survey question on trust found "only 33 percent of readers say managers and employees trust each other in their companies" (*ISHN*).

Overall, the data show two things. First, trust in this country—and in the workplace—is far below the ideal 100 percent positive level for maximum system effectiveness. Second, the impact of low trust on workplace safety and health—and other critical business success factors—is generally unknown.

Since so much has been said about lack of trust, I became convinced that trust and safety were closely linked. But how? Though not trained as a statistician, I determined that a survey might examine the theory and reveal the degree to which trust or distrust influences the practice of safety in the workplace. I designed and administered a survey instrument that identified respondent opinions about safety in their workplace and about whom they trusted for safety. The basic hypothesis was that individuals who do not trust management and other key organizational members are less likely to regard their workplace as safer than other companies in their business group.

Surveys were administered during 2000 and 2001 to two primary groups of participants. These groups were made up of nearly 200 participants who were readily accessible—in all cases, I was serving as the instructor or moderator of a program they were attending—and they represented a broad cross-section of both labor and management.

Approximately one-third were safety and health practitioners, human resource managers and specialists, and operations managers from various companies that were members of a large regional employers' association. These individuals had come voluntarily to an association-spon-

FIGURE 2

Jobs Held by Participants

Administrative assistant
Assembler
Builder
Cashier
Chief financial officer
Cook
Courier
Crane operator
Crew boss
Customer service
Data entry clerk
Department supervisor
Driver
Equipment technician
Engineer
Executive
Facilities engineer
Facilities manager
Farm hand
Farmer
Film splicer
Finance manager
Forktruck operator
Glass packer
Glazier
Helper
Herdsman
Human resources manager
Human resources specialist
Industrial hygienist
Inspector
Laborer
Landscaper
Licensed practical nurse
Loader operator
Lumber piler
Machine operator
Maintenance manager
Maintenance mechanic
Manager
Manufacturing analyst
Mechanic
Mold operator
Munitions specialist
Nurse
Occupational health nurse
Office manager
Operator
Packer
Pest control technician
Police officer
Power plant technician
Press assistant
Press operator
Process engineer
Production control technician
Production supervisor
Repair specialist
Risk manager
Safety specialist
Sales manager
Sales person
Saw operator
Security officer
Shipping operator
Stock clerk
Supervisor
Surveyor
Systems engineer
Tax preparer
Teacher's aide
Timber cutter
Toll collector
Trainer
Truck driver
Warehouse supervisor

sored briefing on the proposed OSHA Ergonomic Program Standard in January and February 2000.

The survey was administered at the end of the briefing. Forms were distributed to all attendees; they were informed that the response would be used for research and would not be associated with them or their company. It took two to three minutes to complete the form, which was then left on the speaker's table as participants exited the room. Fewer than 10 percent were left blank or not returned.

The remaining participants were new hires at a large flat glass facility in its second/third year of operation. Surveys were collected from March 2000 through May 2001. The survey was administered at the end of a day of safety orientation training halfway through a 3.5-day program. As with the association participants, forms were distributed, completed, and immediately collected as participants exited the room. Participants were instructed to answer the survey based on their *previous job.* All forms were returned, with none left blank.

In both cases, participants were present for training purposes and unaware that a survey would be administered. This approach gave ready access to large numbers and effectively removed any influence or involvement by those being evaluated on the survey form. Data from both groups represents a diverse set of industries (Figure 1) and jobs held (Figure 2).

The survey instrument (Figure 3) gave participants a true/false choice on eight individuals or organizational units in response to the introductory question "As a general rule, when it comes to doing the right things for workplace safety, I trust. . . ."

The final two questions required a true/false response: 1) "I believe we are better at safety than most others in our industry"; and 2) "I believe we have a lower incident rate than others in our industry." These questions were intended to separate respondents into two groups—those who believed their organization is *better at safety* than others in their industry and those who believed their organization is *poorer at safety* than others in their industry.

Based on comments made when surveys were returned (as well as blanks on the form) I concluded that many respondents were unaware of incidence rates for either their company or their industry. On the other hand, comments by new hires during their safety orientation indicated that respondents were very aware of the level of safety in their industry and where their company stood in relation to others. For these reasons, the classification decision was based solely on the first question "I believe we are better at safety than most others in our industry." Fewer than a dozen responses were rejected because that question was not answered on the form.

Of the total 172 responses, 72 (41.9 percent) indicated a belief that their organization was better at safety than others in their industry; 100 (58.1 percent) saw their organization as being poorer at safety. Table 1 provides a summary of participant data.

A graph of data from all respondents (Figure 4) showed a clear difference in responses between the "better at" and "poorer at" groups—with one marked exception. The scores for OSHA in both groups were relatively high and separated by slightly more than six percentage points. The substantially higher positive response (85.1 percent) in the "better at" group versus the responses obtained by ACSI may have something to do with the OSHA area office that covers most of the participants' workplaces; in the author's opinion, this office enjoys an excellent reputation.

As for the 78.8 percent positive response from the "poorer than" group, it is quite possible that OSHA offers the only recourse to individuals faced with a relatively uncaring management and workplace culture. It also suggests a caution for others in the survey. Senior managers may wish to reconsider attacks on OSHA actions and programs such as the rescinded Ergonomics Program Standard. Criticizing an agency that others generally hold in high regard may accomplish little change at the agency, yet might dig the distrust hole deeper for management.

While the safety manager does reasonably well compared to others in both groups, a 57 percent positive for the "poorer than" group suggests that the fine line most safety professionals walk between management advisor and employee advocate has left no one satisfied. If the organization is "poorer than" others in the industry, then the safety manager as advisor is not working well. And, if more than 40 percent of employees in "poorer than" organizations do not trust the safety manager, then the advocate role has failed as well.

Both "poorer than" and "better than" groups express the most trust in their immediate team and the least trust in senior management. This distrust was not unexpected, however. The HR Benchmark Group study found senior management to be the least-trusted group (Bernthal). The Manchester Consulting study concurred, concluding, "Trust levels were considered the worst between front-line employees and top-level executives" ("How to Gain").

While the immediate supervisor scores fairly well in both groups, front-line employees score little better than senior management in both groups. When line respondents are separated from other survey participants (Figure 5), the level of trust in front-line employees in the "poorer than" group falls even further (38.4 percent).

Anecdotal information helps to understand this low score. Many line personnel among new hires reported that previous employers had poor safety processes with no training, minimal (and variable) hazard controls and heavy pressure to produce. In such an environment, reports of fellow employees "doing dumb things" and whose actions were "scary" were common. In addition, many of the "poorer than" workplace cultures were said to give little value to care or concern for others.

FIGURE 3 Safety & Trust Survey

The following brief survey will be compiled and used in the writing of an article for publication in a safety trade journal. It will not identify individuals, companies or organiztions.

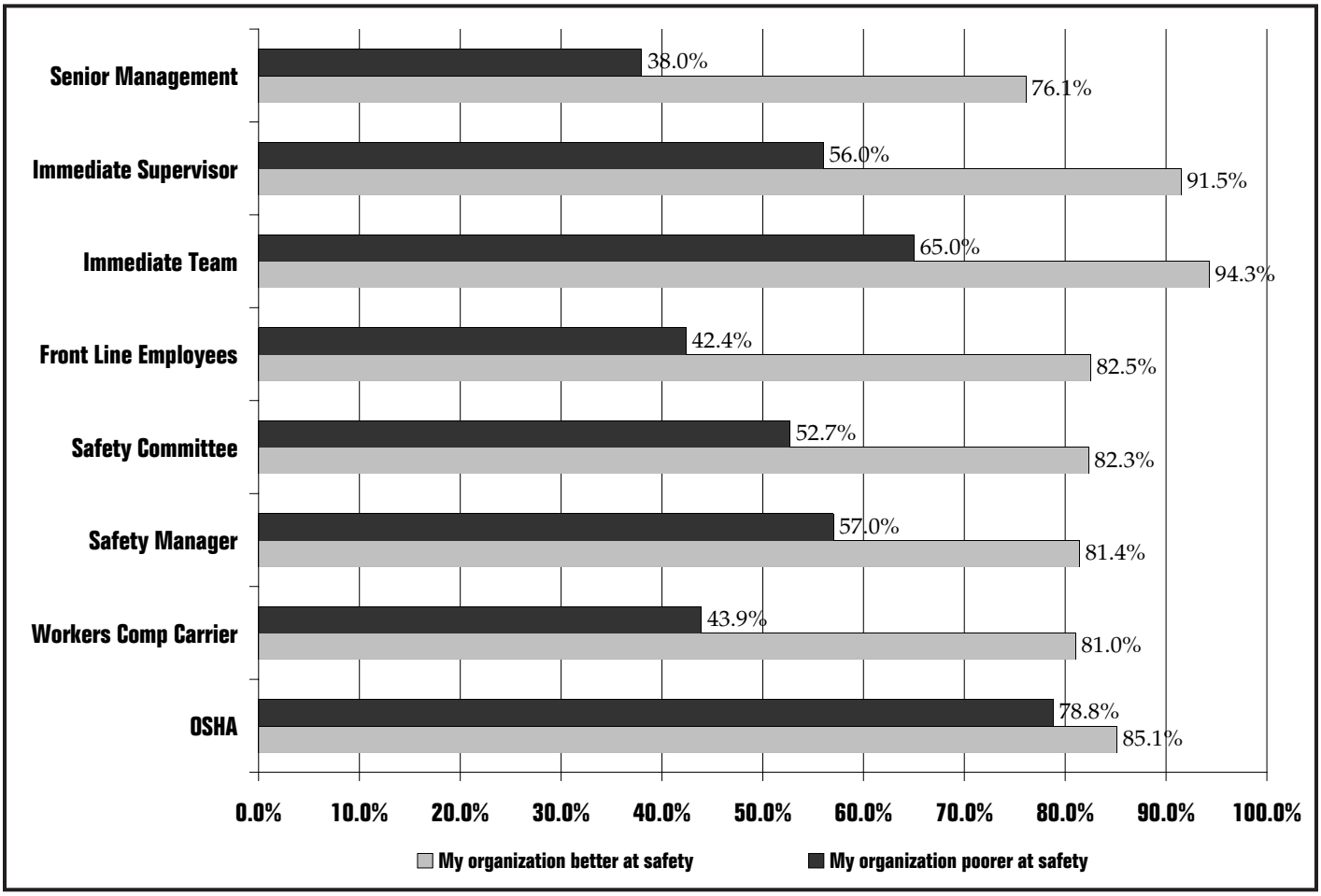
As a general rule, when it comes to doing the right things for workpace safety, I:

	True	False
Trust my senior management	[ ]	[ ]
Trust my immediate supervisor	[ ]	[ ]
Trust the members of my immediate team	[ ]	[ ]
Trust the front-line employees	[ ]	[ ]
Trust the safety committee	[ ]	[ ]
Trust the safety manager/coordinator	[ ]	[ ]
Trust our workers' compensation carrier	[ ]	[ ]
Trust OSHA	[ ]	[ ]
Believe we are better at safety than most others in our industry	[ ]	[ ]
Believe we have a lower incident rate than others in our industry	[ ]	[ ]

My primary job is _____.

Our general business or industry is_____.

FIGURE 4 Safety & Trust Survey: All
Percent who agree with the statement, "When it comes to doing the right things for safety, I trust . . ."



Another surprising discovery was the level of distrust of senior management (36.8 percent positive) expressed by other managers in the "poorer than" group (Figure 6). Those same managers seemed more positive in their trust of others on the survey, but the gap with senior management is so wide, in the author's opinion, it raises serious questions about the ability of the organization to achieve any improvement—in safety or other critical areas—without some form of dramatic intervention.

HOW TO USE THESE FINDINGS

Finding an absence of trust is easy. Conduct an internal opinion survey and one is likely to uncover enough data to depress any safety manager. But Judith Erickson offers a pointed caution. "If your survey shows there is little trust between managers and employees—so what? That's not helpful. What is helpful is to know why" (Erickson).

She's right. The link between safety and trust from the data collected compels further study of human and organizational behavior, and points toward the need to assess management systems and workplace relationships when evaluating workplace safety. It may also provide material for discussion in a management training session and help participants see safety and health as an integral component of the workplace culture.

What it *does not* suggest is corrective action. For that, one needs to know *whether* low levels of trust exist within an organization, *why* they exist and *what* needs to be done. This requires more company-specific research-surveys; listening to people; and observing and understanding the culture. It requires identifying the trust-destroying history—things promised, not done; actions planned, not taken; word given then broken. And it requires the active involvement of the workforce in seeking answers. All this must be done *before* trying to fix safety. The fix for both trust and safety runs concurrently.

HOW DO WE BUILD TRUST?

Henry L. Stimson, Secretary of War under Presidents Roosevelt and Truman, said, "The only way to make a man trustworthy is to trust him" (Simpson). This is sound advice for managers who sometimes consider their employees to be insufficiently intelligent to do the job they were hired to do. This raises a question about the hiring process: Were employees hired "stupid" or did they get that way after working for a while? Stimson's advice also works going the other direction. It is not uncommon to hear wage-roll employees attribute the foulest of intent to a well-meaning management decision.

In light of Stimson's advice, consider these thoughts from Peters. He calls drug testing as a condition of employment and random drug testing as a condition of continued employment "utter, unadulterated rubbish" (Peters 1994, 318-9). Strong words for many companies that see such testing as the lynch pin of their safety and health effort. Peters's point is that business works because of "super folks who trust one another, care about one another, and are committed to working hard together to create great outcomes for each other. . . . Trust. Respect. Commitment. Mutual support. Each is wholly at odds with intrusive, impersonal assessment measures—drug tests" (Peters).

Building trust involves much more, however. If site-specific surveys and discussions with employees and supervisors fail to yield helpful answers, consider

these universal variables cited in the HR Benchmark study:

•communicates with me openly and honestly without distorting any information;

•shows confidence in my abilities by treating me as a skilled, competent associate;

•keeps promises and commitments;

•listens to and values what I say, even though s/he might not agree;

•cooperates with me and looks for ways in which we can help each other (Bernthal).

The Manchester Consulting study covered similar ground for those seeking to build—or regain—trust in their organization. The percentage of respondents selecting the characteristic is shown:

•maintain integrity (58 percent);

•openly communicate their vision and values (51 percent);

•show respect for employees as equal partners (47 percent);

•focus on shared goals more than personal agendas (38 percent);

•do the right thing regardless of personal risk (36 percent);

•listen with an open mind (33 percent);

•demonstrate caring compassion (22 percent);

•maintain confidences (15 percent) ("How to Gain").

Research and experience make it clear that Daniels' advice for building trust is dead-on target. "Do what you say you will do" (Daniels). Thus, the question becomes, "What should we do to build trust in safety efforts?" For the answer, one need only to have read the pages of this journal over the years. Here are some of the author's trust-building axioms for company leaders that develop from such study:

•Develop a vision of what is possible in safety—and lead to achieve the vision.

•Talk about visions and plans and expectations—but only if you know what you are talking about.

•Teach everyone the process and technology of safety—and let them use what they were taught.

•Encourage—and reinforce—involvement in all elements of the process.

•Find what needs to be fixed—safety process, hazards, knowledge, working relationships—then fix what is found.

•Focus on—and reinforce—what is working well (which is usually most things).

•Treat people as they were when they were hired—competent, honest, hard-working, eager to do the job; most likely, they are still like that.

•Realize that you cannot slip something by employees—they know you much better than you know them.

•Back plans and decisions with good science—safety is not "common sense!"

•If you do not believe safety excellence is possible, that your people are smart, and that organizational outcomes are directly related to the climate and culture top management has created—consider another line of work.

CONCLUSION

The research suggests several factors must be considered as safety professionals strive to improve the safety process. In many settings, workplace trust is seriously diminished. Safety levels and trust levels appear to vary directly. Significant safety improvement cannot be expected if trust levels remain low.

FIGURE 5 Safety & Trust Survey: Line Personnel
Percent who agree with the statement, "When it comes to doing the right things for safety, I trust . . ."

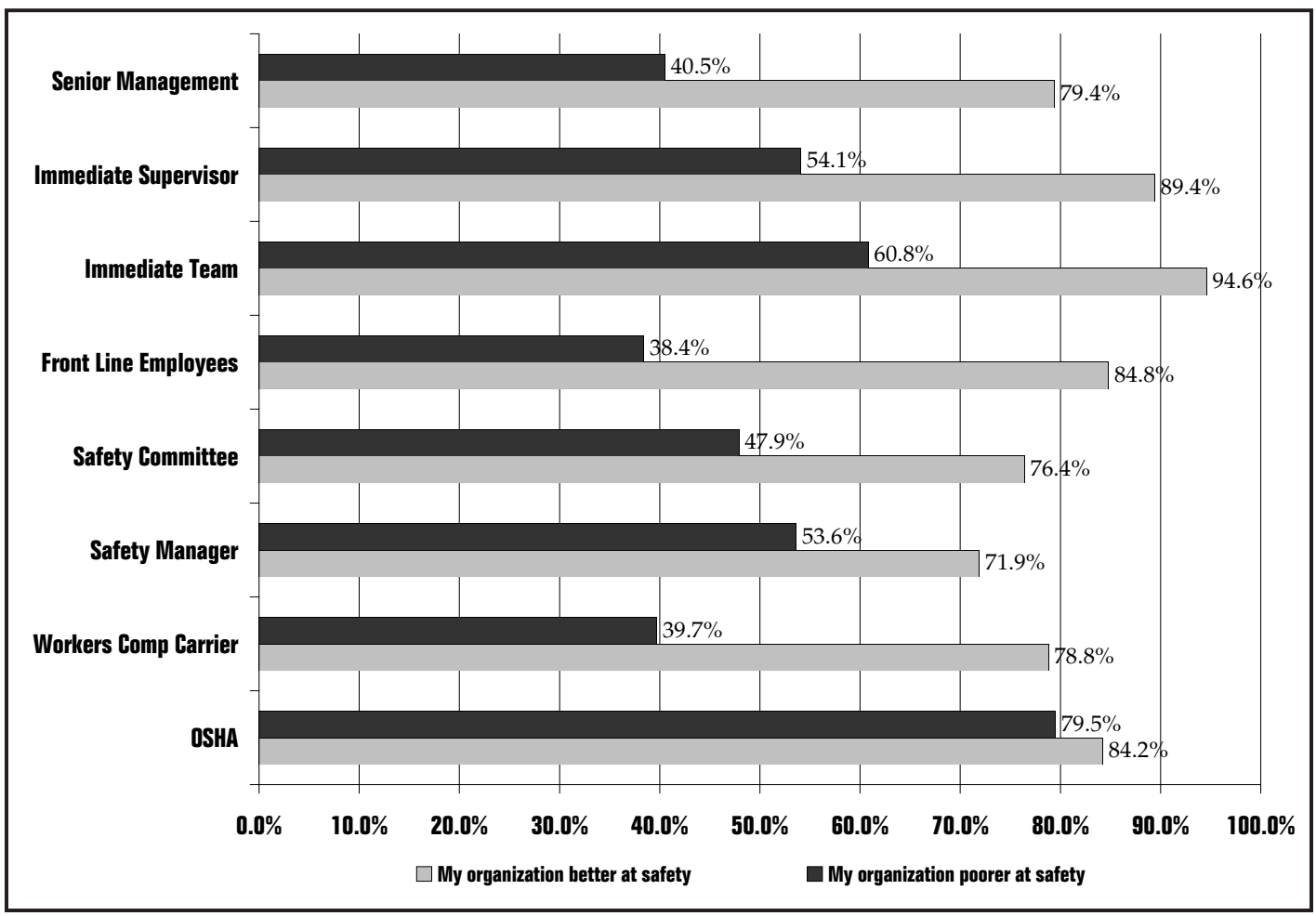
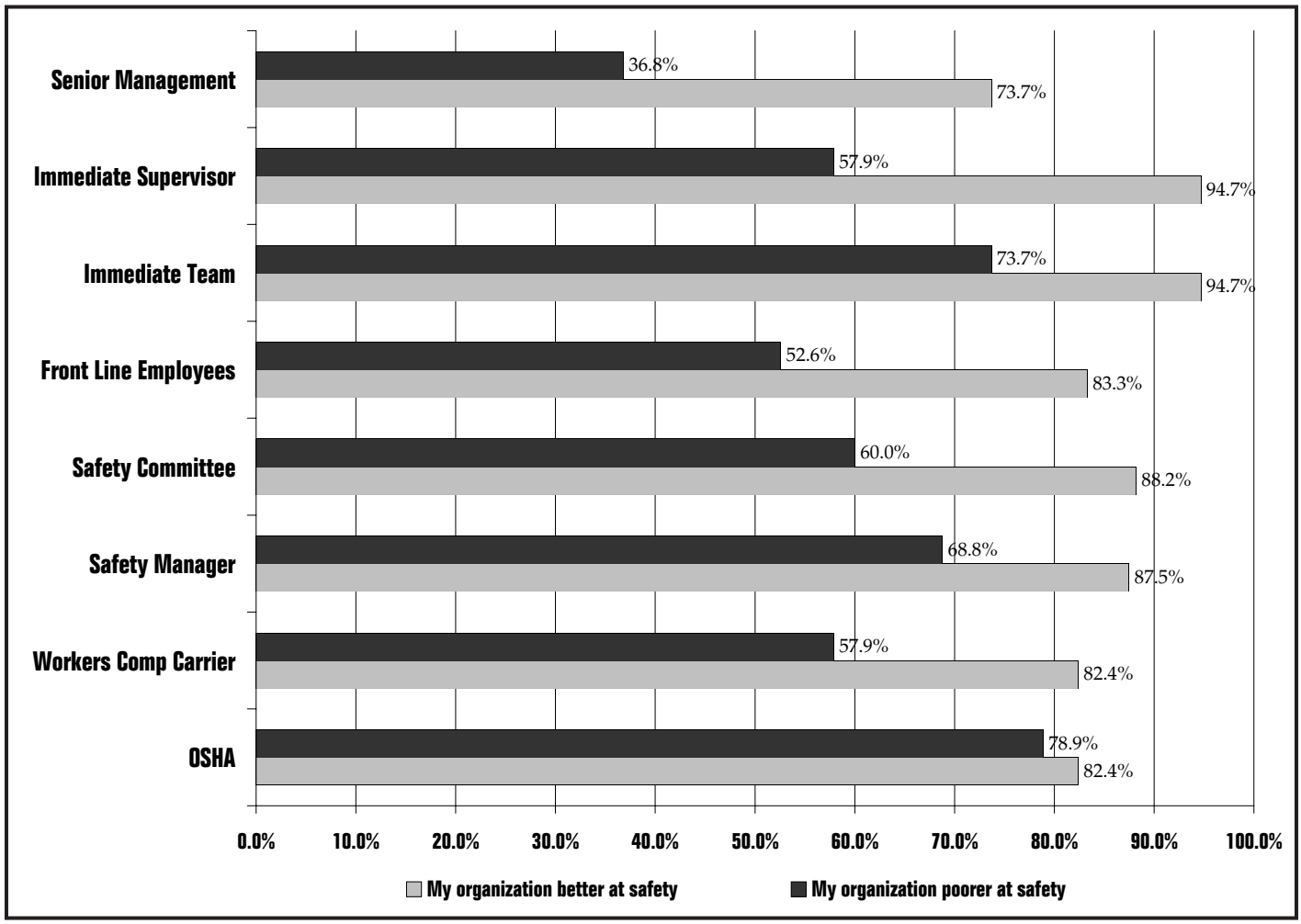


FIGURE 6 Safety & Trust Survey: Management
Percent who agree with the statement, "When it comes to doing the right things for safety, I trust . . ."



Universal trust improvement factors are known and may serve as a starting point when discussing organizational values and business relationships. Factors that cause diminished trust in a specific workplace must be identified and addressed for that workplace. ■

REFERENCES

American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI). Ann Arbor, MI: National Quality Research Center, University of Michigan Business School and Arthur Andersen Office of Government Services, November 2000.

Bernthal, P. "A Survey of Trust in the Workplace," Bridgeville, PA: Development Dimensions International. <http://www.ddiworld.com/pdf/HRBENCH4.pdf>.

Daniels, A.C. *Bringing Out the Best In People.* New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994.

Erickson, J. Personal discussion. Jan. 10, 2001.

Geller, E.S. "Interpersonal Trust," *Professional Safety.* April 1999: 16-19.

Intracorp. "Injured Worker Experience with the Workers' Compensation System: Conducted by The Gallup Organization." Philadelphia: Intracorp, 1997.

Manchester Inc. "How to Gain and Lose Employees' Trust." Jacksonville, FL: Manchester Inc. <http://www.manchesterus.com/hr-trust.html>.

"ISHN White Paper." *Industrial Safety and Hygiene News.* November 2000.

Marshall, E. "Implement Trust-Based Workplace." *The Raleigh/Durham Business Journal.* Sept. 25, 1998.

OSHA. "OSHA Gets High Marks for Worker Satisfaction." News release. Washington, DC: OSHA, Dec. 22, 2000.

Peters, T. *The Circle of Innovation.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997.

Peters, T. *The Pursuit of WOW!* New York: Vintage, 1994.

Pierce, F.D. "Safety in the Emerging Leadership Paradigm." *Occupational Hazards.* June 2000: 63-66.

Simpson, J.B. *Simpson's Contemporary Quotations.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988.

Snow, C. "Building Trust in the Workplace." <http://eon.law.harvard.edu/trusting/snow.html>. 1997.

"Teachers Most Trusted People in America." Louis Harris Poll. *Virginia Journal of Education.* January 1999. <http://www.veaweteach.org/america.html>.

The Gallup Organization. "Honesty/Ethics in Professions." Princeton, NJ: The Gallup Organization, 2000. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/indicators/indhnsty_ethcs.asp>.

Lawrence H. "Chip" Dawson *is a safety management consultant in Rochester, NY. He also manages safety, health and environmental training and consulting for the Industrial Management Council of Rochester. Retired from Eastman Kodak, where he was director of industrial safety at the company's primary plant, Dawson holds a B.A. from Oklahoma State University and did graduate work in management at the University of Illinois. He is a Commander, USNR (retired). Dawson is a professional member of ASSE's Genesee Valley Chapter.*