

First Thursday Safety Topic

May 2019



Three Mistakes Leaders Make About Mistakes – *What You Can Do to Correct the Errors*

Mistakes will be made if progress is made, but mistakes that lead to injury are not worth the progress made. - Carl Potter

Mistakes – what are they? First, they are something we’ve all experienced. A mistake is an action or judgment that is misguided or wrong; something that goes wrong in search of a solution, or a deviation of the norm. When I work with leaders, I see three kinds of mistakes that leaders make about mistakes. Each relates to attitudes about mistakes or errors.

1. Thinking that situations, jobs, and environments can be made perfect so people won’t make mistakes.

Perfecting situations, jobs, and environments can stifle an organization. I call this “the paralysis of perfection”. Some people want to spend so much time perfecting processes, plans, and people that nothing gets done....and when it does, high anxiety is usually observed in employees – and mistakes are rampant.

Why? Because perfectionism can lead to punishment – or fear of punishment – if things go wrong. Instead, focus on excellence – doing the right things well. Engage everyone in excellence and you’ll find an organization-wide focus on excellence rather than on perfection.

2. Acting as if mistakes are okay.

This is a hands-off approach. All mistakes are not equal. Some have minor, short term consequences; others are a matter of life and death. Make sure you know the consequences of various types of mistakes.

3. Having no tolerance for mistakes – of any magnitude.

Mistakes are opportunities for learning. When a “no-tolerance” attitude exists, accidents and near-misses are hidden, driving the safety culture to a downward spiral. People become afraid for their jobs. Fear becomes a distraction and the risk of injuries and fatalities is increased.

Take time to reconsider your attitude and approach to mistakes – are you thwarting progress with a hard line or are you treating each mistake on a case-by-case basis?

When presenting my “target zero injury” philosophy for industry, one of the main points I want to convey is that people make mistakes. We are not infallible. Yet I often hear someone with little experience in the field or new to management say something like, "You can't fix stupid." I'm not sure, but it sounds like they think their co-workers or employees can't learn and are going to continually make mistakes. Hearing that makes me think they have never made a mistake and are above the rest.

Humans make mistakes for many reasons; intentionality is not one of the reasons. People learn by trial and error and the fastest way to learn is by ‘rote’ or repetition. Unfortunately, most people don’t work in an environment without variables. Variables come in many forms including personal distraction, changing environments (weather, co-workers, places, equipment and the like), and differences in people.

Occasionally an employee who is often hurt on the job is labeled a "frequent flyer" by management – and sometimes referred to as stupid. In reality, they are making mistakes.

I have noticed that some of the most productive employees can fall into the "frequent flyer" category because they are blazing through their work. In my experience and research, I find that this employee is valuing production over

