Disciplined to Work Safe: *Practicing Personal Accountability*

By Carl Potter, CSP, CMC
CarlPotter.com

Example is not the main thing in influencing others, it is the only thing.
                                                        ~ Albert Schweitzer

In the high-risk work environment where death and injury can occur, discipline strategies must be a part of the safety process. Hence, the term *disciplinary process;* A disciplinary process follows a general, pre-established process. The first step is exercising personal accountability by following the organizations work practices and safety rules. Just as the laws of our land do not carry the same penalties for different offenses, not all illegal safety activities carry the same penalty.

A parking ticket may cost you $15 but speeding 50 miles per hour in a school zone will cost you hundreds of dollars plus possible time in jail! Why should our workplace be any different? Many tasks carry irreversible consequences. For example, in the process manufacturing industry "confined space entry" is a task performed by maintenance and engineering personnel. Tanks, tubs, giant mixing bowls – any area where gases can build up or oxygen can become depleted – are hazardous.

A worker may jump into a tank to take a look at something inside while holding his breath because it will "only take a minute." "I don't need to follow safe entry procedures." What is the risk? Believe me when I tell you it can be your death. There are too many fatal accident reports documenting such unsafe behaviors. Many times, it has caused multiple deaths because the victim's coworker decides to go in to rescue him or her.

So if you observe this kind of unsafe behavior, what should you do?
If no one is hurt, should it count as a near miss?

First, if we don't recognize the hazard for what it is then we are bound to repeat the act. Moreover, if nobody says anything or there is no accountability, then the unsafe act is not only accepted but condoned by everyone – making it a norm. This really isn't rocket science. The importance of speaking-up is obvious as is the need to make sure everyone understands that the unsafe act is unacceptable in the culture being developed.

Unsafe work behavior simply leads to injuries, maiming, and sometimes death. Simply put… Safe behaviors reduce the risk of injuries.

Work procedures that can lead to death or serious injury must have disciplinary actions that are clear and consistently applied. Managers who fear retaliation if they suspend or terminate an employee who acts unsafely tend to avoid conflict and are often the one to face a family in the hospital or graveyard.

For an organization the risk is two-fold. If an employee is fired as a disciplinary action for high-risk, unsafe behavior, the organization can be sued. If an employee is not disciplined and continues their unsafe behavior, the company can also be sued for not taking appropriate safety precautions. Accountability is everyone's responsibility wither anyone likes it or not.

To sustain success in safety an organization must strive to foster accountability in such a way that each individual is willing to be held accountable. Further this requires the top leadership in the organization to

make sure everyone is able to accept accountability. If the environment is not supportive then the result will not be achieved. Trust is a key factor.

It is my experience that individuals with positive safety attitudes are willing to be held accountable but also expect consistency and fairness. If a top executive, middle manager, or supervisor is found not supporting the vision of the organization then they must be held as accountable as the functional level employee who breaks a cardinal rule. If the entire organization heads towards a goal and develops a vision for attaining the goal, commits to and clearly communicates the vision at all levels the result is a successful safety culture.

An environment of trust will lead those with incorrect attitudes toward a safe workplace to join or leave. Either way a company is still legally responsible for the safety of all its employees and the public it serves and affects. As an employee you can help yourself and your employer by being disciplined to practice personal accountability and create a workplace where it is difficult to get hurt.

If you are looking for a safety message that will rally your employees as they go back to work let me know. I am set up to speak from my studio "live" through Microsoft Teams. It would be my honor to visit with you about scheduling presentations so that we stive to continue developing a sustainable and positive safety culture in your workplace. Email me to start the discussion… carl@safetyinstitute.com

Be Safe!
Carl Potter, CSP