

Focusing on the top risks

Written by Brian Darlington
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Safety: it can be about ticking boxes and making the numbers, or caring about those working for the company

How often do we hear managers and safety professionals talking about the importance of achieving their targets for total recordable case rates, lost time injury frequency rates, and other safety milestones that have been set for operations and management teams?

Setting of the milestones has an important role to play in the drive for continuous improvement, however, when linked to bonuses it could result in managers and safety professionals managing safety for the wrong reasons.

Safety is not only about numbers, or about adherence to the relevant safety and health legislation. Safety is not a tick-box type of exercise where certain systems and controls are implemented with the main goal of achieving legal requirements, or a desired safety rating, which can be displayed at the entrance gate.

More importantly, safety management is about caring for each and every one of the employees and contractors employed to work on behalf of the company. It's about caring about those individuals who arrive on site each day to provide a service to the company and earn an honest day's wage.

During the past four years, I have been coaching managers in "managing safety from the heart" and involved in changing the mindset and culture of managers to one of truly caring about those people who are employed in their organisations, departments or sections.

It's not unusual for employees and contractors to be observed conducting work in an "at risk" manner with a high probability for injury and which, at times, has life-altering or even fatal consequences.

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What is even worse is that, in many instances, the tasks are conducted with the full knowledge of managers, supervisors and team leaders, who condone the behaviour. In my view, such managers and supervisors should question their ability and suitability to manage employees and contractors.

Managers and supervisors who manage safety “from the heart” do so because they care about those working for them. They are the ones that always ensure that employees and contractors are able to work in a safe and healthy manner, by making sure they have the required skills, knowledge, tools and means to conduct the work safely, and that they have been clearly instructed on the correct and safe manner to conduct the work and have a clear understanding of what is required.

Caring managers never compromise on the safety and health of their employees and contractors. They would never require their teams to use methods or work in conditions that they would consider unsuitable for their own family members.

Managers who manage safety from the heart:

- Demonstrate visible leadership and are seen on the shop floor talking to the teams about safety and health issues;
- Manage safety because they care about their teams and not only the numbers or safety ratings;
- Continuously drive for improved safety standards and zero harm at the workplace.
- Never compromise on safety standards and adherence thereof;

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- Walk the talk and, by doing so, set high standards and lead by example in achieving them;
- Feel personally responsible when one of their team members is injured; and
- Make their employees believe that they are sincere about the safety and health of the teams.

It is, without doubt, those managers, supervisors and team leaders who manage safety from the heart who develop successful teams and, in turn, achieve the desired safety standards and performance. If a manager can manage the safety issues effectively and shows the caring aspect, he or she will probably also be successful in managing the other aspects of the business effectively.

It makes sense: managers who show their employees and contractors that they care about their safety and health – and develop this culture among their leadership teams – will have positive results.

Brian Darlington is the group head of safety and health for the Mondi Group, based in Vienna, Austria. He has filled the role since 2012 and is responsible for safety and health in more than 30 countries. Brian started working at Iscor before joining Mondi in 1987, working in Gauteng. In 2000 he transferred to the Kraft Division in Richards Bay. During 2005, Brian transferred to Europe, taking up the position of business unit SHE manager, responsible for SHE in paper mills in Austria, Hungary, Israel, Slovakia, Poland, South Africa and Russia, as well as forests operations in South Africa and Russia.