



Nothing's Proprietary, Anything's Preventable: Safety Culture

By Casey Freeman, Senior Consultant, JMW Consultants

I've been working with a group of people who are literally in the trenches, constructing a multi-billion-dollar mine in a rural Canadian province. The massive project is run by a leading global resource company, also a world leader in safety performance. It's a dangerous and complex undertaking to build the mine from scratch, involving more than 1,200 contractors from up to 20 different companies..

When my colleagues and I were introduced to the project, although millions of dollars had already been invested in it, for the rest of the work to be green-lighted, there had to be a significant safety performance improvement in less than a year. Ironically, an independent safety review revealed that from the perspective of local contractors working on the mine, the site was the most safety-conscious environment they had ever encountered. In the province, where the #1 industry is agriculture, people who had grown up around heavy machinery and industrial tools had the perspective that sometimes accidents simply happened.

There was a divide to bridge and it came down to safety culture. In the eyes of the workers, the site was already best-in-class in terms of safety, but in the eyes of senior leaders at the company, they were only half-way where they needed to be.

Taking a stand

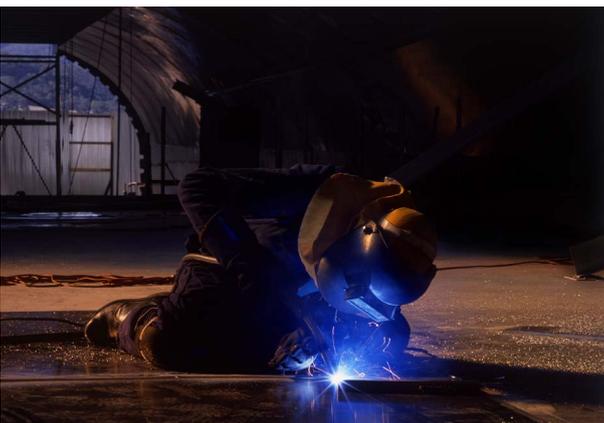
What if you take a stand, and say "All injuries are preventable?" The company pulled together nearly 100 key leaders from across the project to ask that question. And in a small-town hockey rink (the only local place big enough) we spent hours talking through the safety objective and how they could possibly get there. With the project's future possibly at stake, they came out of that leadership forum in agreement on their chief objective: no injuries.

But how do you get all those different contractors – marketplace competitors most of the time – to collectively make safety a priority in a new way? How do you make a difference with the hearts and souls of the people on the front lines, who are also the people most at risk? Many organizations tend to deal with a safety issue by introducing a new initiative, but it's leadership that is really going to make a difference.

Understanding Commitment

At the outset, if you had asked any given contractor onsite, "Are you committed to safety?," they would have said yes. Yet that can be an empty statement unless backed up by behavior. We worked with the leadership forum as they came to understand that if someone onsite made a bad safety choice, it was their responsibility. So next they each went to the front lines – repeatedly – talking with rank-and-file managers. As individual leaders, they were putting themselves on the hook for this effort.

There would be no more "Well what can you do, he's been an electrician for 20 years and he took a short cut." There was something to do. Every major undertaking would entail a detailed risk assessment. Every single safety incident would undergo thorough review and be presented to the leadership forum. Every single worker onsite would know they had to be on board with making sure no one was injured.



From Rules-Based Compliance to Interdependence

In the past, front line leaders had relied on a rules-based culture, essentially having clear rules and managing compliance – cut and dried. But what was required here was something much more, even if unrealistic given the fluid nature of the contractor population. What happened was a shift to interdependence: where people came to share a strong view that every injury is preventable, and that it requires the independent action of each person as well as people looking out for those around them and the choices they make.

Certainly this kind of shift doesn't happen easily, but we saw it happen at this mine. People working both on the surface and sub-surface parts of the project took on a "one site" mentality. Of course they all had a vested interest from an economic perspective, but they also began to look out for one another in ways that most leaders at the site had never witnessed before.

Nothing's Proprietary

Within a year, the key "Total Recordable Injury Frequency" safety indicator for the project came in at 50% better than previously recorded. The results even prompted CEOs of other mining companies in the province to join with our client CEO in creating a "CEO Safety Forum," taking a stand for mining safety throughout the region.

Part of what was inspiring here was the way that contractors pulled together to ensure safety. They collectively agreed to operate in accordance with the shared value of "there is no competition in safety." There was an electrical contractor who had to bury a huge cable deep below the surface, and wasn't accustomed to this kind of high-risk task; a group of contractors came together to conduct a risk assessment and help plan the trenching work. Then there was the contractor who had to move a massive amount of heavy steel down to the bottom of a shaft and had never done anything like this before; other onsite contractors stepped in to share their rigging expertise and help plan the job safely.

In the end, they all had to set their proprietary interests aside in order to make the mine safe and to keep each other safe, with a goal of everyone going home in the same shape they arrived in, every day. It started with leadership taking a stand, and the result was a tough group of people committing to something bigger than themselves. That's how a lot of extraordinary things get done in many industries, and that's what it takes when it comes to creating a culture of safety.

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