

How proactive safety creates a unified company

Johannesburg, 11 March 2020: Everyone is familiar with the safety record board, a point of reference for how many days a site has gone without an accident. This board is the result of health & safety's rising prominence since the early days of the industrial revolution. It symbolises how far we've come to ensure safe working conditions.

Yet it is also symbolic of the rubber-stamping culture that often envelops safety exercises. It's time for a more proactive approach to health & safety, such as what industrial packaging manufacturer PackSolve is creating.

At first glance, calling Health, Safety, Environment & Quality (SHEQ) reactive seems contradictory. Surely safety needs to be anticipated and therefore is a proactive activity? But the distinction between reactive and proactive safety measures depends on how you measure it, explained PackSolve's Group SHEQ Manager, Chris Fritz:

"Most safety is measured on lagging indicators, such as the number of accidents and lost time measures. These are reactive - you can't tell if your safety programme is working until there is an accident. The proactive approach focuses on leading indicators, such as accidents avoided and numbers of inspections completed. It's about preventing accidents by finding close calls."

Aiming for zero harm

This approach is encapsulated in PackSolve's Zero Harm ideal. While Fritz agreed that you couldn't realistically eliminate all accidents, Zero Harm is nonetheless a critical factor. It describes an attitude towards health & safety that is culturally embedded. For example, Zero Harm aims to avoid all serious accidents through several strategies.

Why care about proactive safety? Reducing site accidents can improve productivity, but a reactive safety culture could accomplish some of that. Yet under a reactive safety culture, the risk of injury is assumed and mitigated through other means than addressing safety culture. Proactive safety takes the productivity argument to a different level.

"Employees talk to each other," said Fritz. "If an accident happens on one site, the word spreads. It then becomes very easy for the employer to seem uncaring and apathetic towards worker concerns. But for an employee, if they hear about a fellow worker being injured, they can easily wonder if it could happen to them, and then judge how the company reacts."

Action speaks louder than words - and in the case of a reactive safety culture, a company's perceived lack of action can be incredibly damaging to staff relations and productivity.

No scapegoats

At PackSolve, accidents are widely reported through SHEQ reports. Workers are made aware of an accident and the actions taken. This is done in tandem with an enlightened investigation approach:

"When an accident happens, we don't try to blame the worker or find them at fault as a matter of course. Every site has a SHEQ officer - they will create an investigative team with the involvement of operators, managers and the injured person. The investigation doesn't victimise people. It looks at the situation, the processes involved and such, and tries to identify the problems and root causes. These we use to help prevent future mistakes. It's not about finding a scapegoat. You might think you can get away with that, but your employees

know when the blame is being shifted. You must create transparency for proactive safety to work.”

Proactive safety puts the employee at the centre of considerations, which makes it a valuable tool for creating an inclusive culture. The unions representing PackSolve’s workforce are also involved, promoting safety culture as part of supporting employee rights.

All hands on deck

Proactive safety follows a circular framework. An accident is reported, then investigated. The results inform corrective actions to eliminate factors that contributed to the accident. Site data is then used to verify if the actions are working, and adjustments are made if they don’t.

Corrective action can take many different forms. It may be improved safety signage, or reworking the processes on a manufacturing line. Safety education can be changed and improved. A critical benefit of proactive safety is that workers who buy into safety matters are more likely to flag potential problems and hazards.

In tandem with this, the management layer has to be as involved. If concerns about safety fall on deaf ears, the safety culture will soon erode. It links back to whether workers are feeling included or victimised. It’s also essential for the bottom line: the Quality part of SHEQ refers to product quality, and how health & safety makes direct contributions to the company’s output. Often, addressing safety concerns also tackles operational problems.

So there are good reasons for management and the c-suite to adopt and champion proactive safety, said Fritz:

“Most safety systems are biased in favour of management. They make managers look good, but gives the workforce reasons to grumble. That turns safety into a rubber stamp. Proactive safety needs executive buy-in. It only works if you accept and promote it from the board level. This incentivises managers to take the concept seriously and make it part of their operations.”

The outcome is ultimately a common language and culture for SHEQ, tied closely to productivity and workforce satisfaction. It’s been enormously successful for PackSolve, which has reduced both serious and minor injuries while improving output and building good faith with employees. It’s also been a boon for customers who require on-site work: PackSolve’s safety culture travels with its people and services, reducing the customer’s safety burden.

But this didn’t happen overnight. It is the result of a two-year project, slowly educating every level of the manufacturer on how to embrace proactive safety processes.

“Proactive safety is a pervasive mechanism. Everyone must be involved. But if you do it right, they won’t feel forced to participate. They’ll want to because they can see the benefits.”