Changing Workers' Attitudes Is the Key to Preventing Injury



Total prevention is the Holy Grail of occupational health and safety (OHS). But unlike that mythical chalice, total prevention can really exist in real life. The key to success, many believe, is worker behaviour. One model is the learning organization where workers are continually learning new KSAs (knowledge, skills, and abilities). Workers improve their skills and then take that learning to the workplace where they apply their newly acquired knowledge and teach others, thereby raising the skills of the entire organization.

One of the flaws of this model, at least in the OHS context, is that it omits another crucial "A": attitude. This omission is understandable. Attitude is difficult to define, let alone measure. But it's also essential to success. Simply stated, you can't improve safety culture without improving attitudes.

How OHS Professionals Can Affect Attitude

While a company can get lucky in posting zero injuries for a short period of time, sooner or later their luck will run out. Total prevention on a sustainable basis requires fundamental change. That includes change to workers' behaviour. While knowledge, skills, and abilities certainly have an impact,

attitudes are the key driver of worker behaviour. So, if you want workers to work safely, you must influence their behaviour.

That’s not an easy thing to do. Establishing and strictly enforcing OHS policies and procedures, while necessary, generally has little direct impact on attitudes; the same is true of safety training and even incentive programs. What does resonate with workers is the behaviour of other people in the company. Attitudes are a distillation and reflection of what they learn from watching others.

One of the persons that workers watch and learn from is you, the company OHS director. As long as you recognize this, you can use your influence to change worker attitudes. So, if you truly believe that injuries are preventable, demonstrate that not simply with words but your attitude and behaviour. Doing this effectively will go a long way in changing your workers’ beliefs and attitude and, ultimately, their behaviour. The change you effect may spell the difference between whether workers work safely or unsafely.

Takeaway

It’s difficult to measure the culture and values of an organization; however, making a contribution to changing attitudes is something everyone can take pride in being part of. Remember: What you do, what you say, and how you say it may be enough to prevent accidents and change lives.