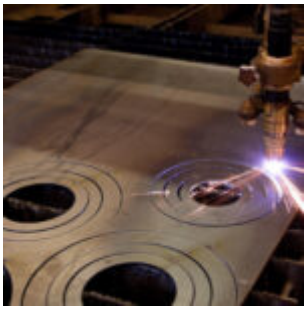
MANAGING YOUR OHS PROGRAM: A Case Study on Breakthrough Changes in Safety



Past research has identified the characteristics of firms that perform poorly or well with respect to work-related injury and illness prevention, but it hasn't shown what it takes to go from one category to the other. A study by researchers at the Institute for Work & Health aimed to help fill that gap. To identify firms that had made breakthrough changes in safety, the team used records from Ontario's Workplace Safety and Insurance Board to identify organizations that, in just 10 years, went from being among the 50% in their sector with the highest claims rates to among the 20% with the lowest claims rates. The improvements had to be sustained for at least three years and not result from restructuring, claims management or chance. Four of the identified firms agreed to take part as case studies. Here's an overview of the breakthrough change process and a look at one of the case studies.

THE PROCESS

Although the details differ, the IWH researchers found that companies that go from being not-so-good to very good OHS performers tend to follow a similar path, which occurs in three phases:

Initiation. Breakthrough change begins with some kind of external influence acting on the organization, ranging from a

government order to a demand from a key buyer for improved workplace safety. Whatever the source, this influence brings three things into play within the company:

- Organizational motivation to do better at workplace health and safety;
- An influx of new OHS knowledge previously unknown to the organization, such as from an OHS consultant or through the hiring of a new OHS specialist; and
- The integration of that new knowledge into policy and practice through the work of a knowledge transformation leader. This leader'the OHS coordinator, HR manager, owner or some other person inside the workplace'tends to be a 'people person,' who's persistent, competent, trusted and organized.

Transformation. The organization's OHS performance starts to improve because of five key elements:

1. The organization responds to OHS concerns (organizational responsiveness) and the workforce takes note, resulting in its increased participation in health and safety.
2. An energy develops within the workplace (positive social dynamics) involving management-worker collaboration, worker empowerment and individual passion for health and safety. This energy may be especially evident in a reinvigorated JHSC.
3. The workplace develops a continuous improvement pattern, in which improvements in workplace health and safety continue despite what has already been achieved.
4. At the same time, the organization makes improvements in areas other than workplace health and safety that also lower risk (simultaneous operation-al improvement), such as engaging in lean, quality and organizational excellence initiatives.
5. Finally, there's a positive working environment (supportive internal context) characterized by good

management-worker relations, low turnover, good communications and a supportive senior management team that allows both time and money to be spent on OHS initiatives.

Outcome. The organization reaps the rewards of its change efforts. What was once new OHS knowledge becomes integrated OHS knowledge. New OHS policies and procedures are in place. OHS training is ongoing. Both managers and front-line staff engage in new OHS practices, such as communicating regularly about workplace health and safety, and identifying, assessing and controlling hazards. And people at all levels of the organization are held responsible and accountable for health and safety. These outcomes result in decreased OHS risk, which in turn leads to decreased work-related injury and illness.

THE CASE STUDY

For each case study, the research team interviewed 10 people in various roles, as well as collected additional information such as WSIB claims records, MOL enforcement records, JHSC minutes and other OHS-related documents. One of the studied firms was a metal manufacturer (the company names and real names of individual employees weren’t included in the case studies).

At Metal Manufacturer, which employs 200 people, the work is physical and hard. Manufacturing metal machinery parts involves grinding, bending and welding metal, with the help of cranes and hoists to move material around. Typical injuries include eye injuries, lacerations, pinched fingers, injuries from falling objects, abrasions and burns, as well as musculoskeletal disorders in the hand, arm and lower back. In the mid-2000s, Metal Manufacturer had a poor OHS record that went back many years. Although a JHSC had been in place since 1980, attempts to improve health and safety had typically been a ‘knock-down, drag-out fight,’ according to a long-time worker. Worker complaints raised at committee meetings often

weren’t documented or tracked to resolution. The meetings themselves were often cancelled when important operational issues came up.

After a serious accident in 2001 in which a worker’s foot was crushed, the firm came under the scrutiny of the MOL, which paid multiple visits and wrote many orders. But even then, improvements didn’t take hold. The firm failed a WSIB health and safety audit, prompting managers to bring in an HR supervisor to fill a position that had been left vacant for a couple of years. Another improvement effort was set in motion when Metal Manufacturer was bought by a US company. Mary, the plant manager installed by the new owners in 2004, introduced a series of measures aimed at raising operational performance, including new standard operating procedures, more enforcement of company rules and a move toward rewarding performance over seniority.

But this new emphasis on performance improvement wasn’t sufficient alone to bring about a notable change in OHS performance at the time. Sally, the new HR supervisor, had neither the specialized OHS knowledge nor the time on top of her HR duties to do more than basic OHS functions, such as following up on actions and making sure JHSC meetings took place. When the firm faced a second audit, Sally put together an OHS manual that made sure the firm passed the audit. But the program spelled out in the manual wasn’t fully implemented. Even in the years following the foot-crushing injury, some very basic OHS issues weren’t being addressed’some machine guards were still missing, signage wasn’t put up, safety glasses were worn on tops of workers’ heads instead of over the eyes.

At one point, an MOL inspector was so frustrated over a lack of action on an OHS order that he brought his concerns to Metal Manufacturer’s corporate head office, which intervened and instructed the plant to ‘do something.’ The firm then decided to hire a full-time OHS specialist and truly initiated

its ‘breakthrough change.’ As the plant’s first OHS coordinator, Tess brought to the role her college training in workplace health and safety, her experience elsewhere as a JHSC worker representative and union trainer, as well as her passion for workplace health and safety. She soon established an OHS management system. She also had personal warmth, which allowed her to establish effective relationships with managers and workers alike. And she displayed an astute understanding of the process of personal change.

For example, when warned of certain people who were described as potentially difficult, she made a point of meeting those people early on, thus neutralizing their potential opposition. She also sought out conversations with people, expressing an eagerness to learn about their jobs and the hazards involved. She built trust with workers by receiving their complaints in private and keeping the source confidential when bringing the issues forward. By listening and acting on people’s concerns, Tess created a feedback cycle ‘of people being willing to talk more and to expect more.’

Tess also gained the trust of supervisors and managers, who sought her out for information and increasingly referred issues to her as they arose. Tess motivated supervisors to enforce OHS rules by persuading them with arguments about their legal obligations and the cost of injuries to the firm. She took time to explain to people, sometimes one-on-one, the rationale for new rules. She also knew to appeal to emotions. When promoting the use of PPE, for example, she would ask people how they would feel if their child or grandchild was playing hockey with no safety equipment. Putting into action a principle in organizational change of ‘early wins,’ Tess started out working on the little but most visible changes first, such as installing machine guards. It only took a few years for momentum to build.

As effective as Tess was, management support was also an important element in the firm’s turnaround. Victor, a new

plant manager replacing Mary, showed his support of workplace health and safety through words and actions:

- He always mentioned workplace health and safety in monthly staff meetings;
- He sometimes attended JHSC meetings and occasionally took part in committee inspection tours to identify hazards;
- He worked with Tess to make sure that OHS fixes were acted on promptly; and
- Supporting an initiative to address ergonomics for the first time in the plant's history, he freed up funds to bring in an ergonomics consultant, who helped identify hazard control measures such as changing welding guns and providing lighter air helmets for welders.

BOTTOM LINE

Metal Manufacturer is a 'completely different plant' now, says one worker. There are machine guards, limit switches, safety poles to support stacked product, table guards to prevent product from falling, mesh on the sides of open shelves, extra electronic eyes, capacity labels on shelves, industrial curtains separating the welding areas, floor paving at an outdoor storage area where falling steel was once a concern. The list goes on. And along with the decreased hazards, the firm saw claims rates fall from an average of 39 claims per 100 FTEs in the early 2000s to an average of five in the years ending the decade. The firm is now at a point where 'you see things before it happens,' says one worker. Concerns brought up at monthly JHSC inspections get followed up. A new-found spirit of cooperation between management and workers on the committee has taken hold, says another worker, as has a sense of empowerment. Co-workers feel comfortable giving feedback to each other about the safety of their work practices'and to receive those comments in turn. It became a place where a message about shared responsibility is being echoed by people in different roles: 'Safety is not just my job, it's

everyone’s job. We have to work together to make this a better plant.’

***Insider* Source**: ‘METAL PARTS MANUFACTURER: New OHS coordinator helps bring in health and safety knowledge and foster positive dynamics,’ Institute for Work & Health, 2014