

Unmasking the Illusion of Management Safety Tours



Opinion piece supplied by: Hayden Greenshields

In the annals of history, there's a curious tale of Empress Catherine II's lover, Grigory Potemkin, and his creative attempts to impress her. Picture this: scenic villages popping up along the banks of the Dnieper River, only to be disassembled and rebuilt down the riverbank as Catherine sailed by. Talk about dedication to the art of deception!

Potemkin, in his quest to woo Catherine, went all out. He dolled up villagers, picked out the healthiest livestock, and transported them alongside these phony villages. While historians might have spiced up the story a bit, the term "Potemkin Village" forever became synonymous with constructing a literal or figurative façade to fool people into thinking something is grander than it actually is.

Fast forward to modern times, and we find a curious parallel in the world of management safety tours, particularly on construction sites and in industrial plants. These tours, led by senior management and usually joined by a member of the joint health and safety committee, have become standard practice. They occur at regular intervals – weekly, monthly, quarterly, or annually. The idea sounds great on paper: top brass takes a stroll through the worksite, spots hazards, and documents them for action. It's like a safari in the wilds of construction, observing safety issues in real-time and addressing them quicker than the bureaucratic route of worker complaints.

But, dear reader, here's where the illusion begins. There's a whole charade set up before these tours. Middle management, supervisors, and workers unite in a choreographed spectacle of tidying up the workplace, transforming it into a shiny, hazard-free utopia. Instead of senior management witnessing authentic problems and receiving candid feedback from the frontlines, they're led through a maze of carefully prepared areas, showcasing the most predictable issues. What do they find? Fire extinguishers without monthly tags, absent barrier tape, electrical cords on the ground, and safety glasses MIA. It's a buffet of low-hanging fruit!

Critics may argue that these tours foster valuable conversations between the

joint committee members and management based on what they have observed. However, the catch is that the committee member usually represents the employer's interests as a joint committee employer representative and not the workers as a worker representative who is rarely invited. It's like stacking the deck against authenticity. Worker representatives in joint committees are supposed to level the playing field, but excluding them from senior management tours makes employer representatives' joint committee members' attendance merely performative in order to appease clients, regulators, or safety associations.

Some might defend these tours, saying at least senior management is on the ground. But let's be real: senior managers are busy bees and need to optimize their time with real efficiencies and effective safety solutions. Crafting a false image of relative safety with superficial issues to fix doesn't reflect the actual state of the workplace.

So, what's the solution for time-strapped senior management? It's not the intimidating entourage donning shiny new white hard hats and unworn high-visibility vests. It's one-on-one interactions with frontline workers. A five-minute chat with a young carpenter can provide more insights than an hour-long tour filled with uninspected fire extinguishers.

Winston Churchill knew the power of mingling with the masses during World War II. Churchill was known to disappear and show up in London in the subway to find out what ordinary Londoners thought about the war. Allegedly, these outings inspired him to change his decision about the peace negotiations with the Germans simply through frank conversations. Speaking with frontline workers in an unbiased manner yields more information on safety than any report can. Engaging in Socratic questioning (a method of inquiry involving the systematic use of open-ended questions to stimulate critical thinking, explore ideas, and encourage deeper understanding), senior managers can gauge workers' understanding of tasks and risks and even evaluate the effectiveness of frontline supervision.

The goal is to spark candid conversations with those at the bottom of the hierarchy. Their voices are essential for assessing safety culture and performance. To paraphrase Sidney Dekker, a renowned safety scientist, the best measure of a company's safety culture is when the boss wants to hear the bad news. Encouraging dissent from frontline workers is the key to understanding how "good" the safety culture truly is.

Perhaps it's time for organizations to break free from the Potemkin-like rituals of senior management safety tours and embrace real, unfiltered interactions with their workers.

After all, a facade can only hide the truth for so long.



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