

Life After “COR”

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It has been almost 20 years since the *Partnerships in Health and Safety* program became a reality for the people of Alberta. This program was a revolutionary initiative by the Alberta government to actively encourage employers and employees to internalize the responsibility for health and safety within each company. Organizations that were successful in implementing the *Partnerships* program were recognized with a visual honor known as the Certificate of Recognition or COR. Today, the success of this program continues and the need to have a COR is an integral part of conducting business in Alberta, or is it?

What happens when a company uses a system that is based on standards that have not changed or evolved in the past 10 years? The street phrase is “Sink or Swim” and Alberta businesses are doing both when it comes to Health and Safety. The success of a company, particularly in the global marketplace, is dependent on a variety of factors, and core business systems must not only change, but must evolve to meet the challenges created by these factors. New technology and the need to become more efficient and effective in order to meet the demands of global markets and corporate responsibility issues are impacting employers both large and small. An organization that avoids or prolongs change will ultimately fall into a cycle of “fighting fires” with scarce resources until the internal systems collapse or a situation with deadly consequences occurs.

In order to “swim” in today’s business environment, organizations must be committed to the continual improvement of their systems and operations, even when current standards would allow for mediocre performance. This is even more challenging when one of the most significant factors to affect the success or demise of a company is the existence of **Perception**. Personal, corporate and public perceptions are real conditions that can make or break a safety program, a quality system or a company. Positive perceptions equal positive responses, and it has often been observed during the dreaded “audit” that the corporate culture dictates whether the safety system is embraced or shunned. It has also been observed that forced changes, or compliance driven processes create negative responses. These can constrict the ability of the company to implement, and even maintain, basic business systems as required by legislation and certification processes such as COR and ISO.

So how do we improve our performance to exceed the basic expectations of standards like COR and ISO? How do we address the external factors that are affecting all businesses?

There are several challenges that must be addressed if a company is going to proactively create change and get beyond compliance. The first challenge is to recognize the **Symptoms of Withdrawal**; the subtle appearance of time constraints with key people, apathy towards participating in the activities that support the

management system, increasing delays in completing corrective actions, and the most challenging symptom for safety professionals, **silence**. The next task is to kick start the evolution process before erosion sets in, which requires a business strategy; Plan to Create Passion, Manage Perceptions, Control the speed of Change and Evolution, Practice Emotional Intelligence.

To implement this strategy, the organization must determine the Cultural Initiatives (planning to create passion, managing perceptions) that are required and the Process Advancements (controlling and managing change/evolution, emotional intelligence) that are needed to move from survival mode to world-class performance. Cultural initiatives must address communication issues, territorial or silo mentalities, and measurement programs that focus on positive behaviors and activities. Process advancements in corrective action management, formal competency training and system integration to eliminate operational redundancy are needed.

A People Management strategy that uses the skills of Emotional Intelligence is vital to cultural evolution. To help the organizational culture embrace change, and even demand progress, the fundamental value of WIFM – “what’s in it for me” must be addressed. Understanding the principles of adult learning will also assist a company in recognizing the internal (emotions) and external life factors that can impede change. Time commitments, attention span, interest level, relevance to current activities, respect, satisfaction of achievement, and most importantly, the fear of looking foolish are real barriers to proactive change and evolution. WIFM must address these factors or the success of new initiatives will falter and even fail.

Change is also a condition that must be managed with emotional intelligence. Change is often perceived as a bad thing and can create fear if the group who is being asked to change is not driving the *change initiative*. Methods that have been used to “sell” organizational change to the culture have included perception surveys (give the people what they want), communication boards and newsletters, personal meetings that encourage participation and involvement. These are tools that can support the need for change and evolution, but these will not create WIFM, nor will they drive the culture to demand change.

To create WIFM and the desire for change, a company must focus on communication strategies that are personal and visually appealing. The principles used in Visual Manufacturing and “error-proofing” (poke-yoke) can provide safety professionals with new ideas on how to address language, culture and perception issues that can interfere with cultural evolution. Broadening the scope of the Health and Safety Management system to actually focus on, and address, HEALTH and Wellness issues that are affecting society can increase trust and respect values in the culture. This in turn can lead to the desire for more information and active participation in the activities that support the management system. Finally, a shift in management focus towards positive goals and events, instead of end of the pipe measurements, such as frequency and severity of accidents, will encourage the culture to experiment with new ideas and embrace the unknown.

Next is the challenge of sustainability. Like a train, the push to change may be slow to start, but once the culture embraces and drives the evolution process, the demand for information and improvement will accelerate out of control. Organizational infrastructure and processes must be capable of sustaining the change process, or like

a train that runs out of track, the entire initiative will crash and burn. This has been a common complaint amongst safety and quality professionals who have often encountered the shooting star syndrome when new programs or initiatives are introduced. So how do we keep the train on the track and the stars in the sky?

Improvements to organizational infrastructure and processes must focus on increasing efficiency and eliminating redundancy by integrating core systems such as quality, safety, environment and even human resources. Establishing goals and targets at every level of the organization is commendable, but a waste of time and effort if an effective measurement and corrective action process is missing. Consistent and standardized methods (and that does not necessarily mean more paperwork!) that track, measure, analyze and respond in a timely manner to significant operational/ people issues, concerns, process and product deficiencies will provide the foundation for sustainable change.

To support the integrity of this foundation, a structured competency training system that focuses on the critical skills needed by the organization must also be implemented. This training system must not only identify the people resources needed by the organization, but must support the development of practical qualification and competency skills in the people who are the company. Competency verification through a "tell, show, test" method is vital to company compliance and growth, and should not be restricted to new employees, but applied to all levels of the organization, including the trainers themselves.

The final component to process advancement, is to avoid the document trap. More records and more paper work do not equal a successful management system or safety program. Document the right things using the tools that best fit the organization, and not those that best fit the government, industry or auditor. If the safety manual and policy book are thicker than the company financial statements, then you have a serious implementation problem.

Whether you are trying to revitalize your system, to maintain what you have already achieved or to improve your performance to exceed minimum expectations, the following practices should be considered. Plan and know what you want to do or you will run out of track; Communicate at all levels using emotional intelligence, not just emotions; Celebrate and focus on the positive achievements, not matter how small and Accept the reality of your resources and limitations.

Once upon a time, a man stepped onto a podium to address the most powerful nation in the world. With a speech that spanned less than 20 minutes, he convinced millions of people to commit to a 10-year goal by simply changing their perception from **having to do it, to choosing to do it** . . . and the world watched a man walk on the moon.

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