



At This GE Plant, Culture Change Brings Labor and Management Together on Safety

GE united labor and management in a new safety culture change process: safety became the responsibility of all hands. Positive results: in four years, Fitchburg cut its incident rate by 76%. One-time Union skeptic says, "Safety is part of our culture. We are no longer willing to accept any practice that is less than safe. Our culture simply will not allow things to be done wrong."

The GE Navy and Small Engine facility in Fitchburg, Massachusetts, employed seven hundred people in the manufacture of small steam turbines. Prior to 1995, the facility had an unenviable safety record, with OSHA incident rates as high as the 40s in some segments of the shop and an average of 14. There was one safety committee, made up of management representatives and safety professionals and a separate union safety committee. In spite of efforts to improve the plant's safety profile, these figures remained essentially flat for a number of years.

By early 1995, there was a new plant manager and a new EHS officer, Mark Leik, whose mandate was to break through that invisible safety barrier. "I had been in this situation before," says Leik, "and had extremely positive results after introducing safety culture change to GE Apparatus Service centers in California." He called in Culture Change Consultants* - his partner on the successful California effort.

During an introductory overview workshop with a cross-section of plant employees, Leik and the Culture Change Consultants' seminar leader explained that traditional reliance on safety engineering and identification of human error seemed to have reached its limits at GE Fitchburg. Leik proposed trying something new. Culture change seeks to improve the underlying group norms, values and assumptions that influence the behavior and actions of individuals. Workers would be empowered to take more responsibility for their own safety. In spite of a high degree of skepticism among the union rank and file, the plant workers voted in favor of the proposal to take part in the safety culture change effort - while retaining their own safety committee.

An initial culture perception survey indicated just how impoverished the safety culture was. There was a huge trust gap between labor and management. Workers questioned whether management really cared about safety and management suspected that labor had been sabotaging prior safety efforts. The only bright spot was that management and labor agreed about the poor safety attitudes and conditions to an unprecedented degree. Only a few points separate the two groups on 11 of 12 safety culture scales. Follow-up focus groups reinforced these results.

As a result of these surveys, a proposal was developed to do away with the old safety committee and replace it with a set of teams - including three grassroots teams - that would have much broader participation. Eventually, about 10% of the factory workers became involved with the new teams. Management gave them time off to participate and they were trained to run meetings, in communications, and in safety regulations. They were also encouraged and instructed in how to access and use the resources of the company.

The new teams took the ball and ran with it. Fellow workers with problems or complaints were comfortable approaching them. In most cases, they found that they could accomplish things more quickly and effectively by researching issues and proposing solutions than by passing complaints up the "chain of command." Once thought to be the exclusive responsibility of a few EHS professionals, safety became the responsibility of all hands. Workers made up the great majority of the safety teams, EHS professionals provided technical guidance, and management provided the necessary resources. Suddenly, safety was everywhere: on the agenda of every start-up meeting, the subject of its own newsletter, the theme of weekly videos, and the topic of many conversations on the shop floor.



The results were better than anyone could have expected. Although safety culture change is typically a five-seven year process, positive results appeared in the first two years. When the program started, Fitchburg had 88 recordable accidents. The first year of the program brought the number down to 52 and the second year 37.

As reality changed, so too did perceptions. According to one of the team leaders, "It used to be that an accident was always the fault of the people on the floor. Then everyone became more interested in finding the root cause, and fixing it, rather than assigning blame." A union official, and one-time skeptic, put it this way, "Safety is [now] part of the culture. We are no longer willing to accept any practice or tool that is less than safe. The culture will simply now allow things to be done wrong."

***Culture Change Consultants has consulted at more than 25 GE facilities - including power generation, nuclear power, medical systems, and plastics - to facilitate safety culture change.**