



## **Leadership Drives Safety Culture Change Initiative at General Motors**

**General Motors top manufacturing managers take charge of Culture Change Consultants' safety culture change process and inspire workers to drive safety path every hour of every day: incidents and lost time injuries are reduced more than 80% over eight years.**

In spite of its best efforts, General Motors had a mediocre safety record throughout the 1980s and into the early 90s. "We were spinning our wheels," said Joe Spielman, chair of the GM Manufacturing Managers Council (MMC). "Even though we had an active joint [company and union] safety committee and had spent tens of millions of dollars on safety programs, we were making little headway in reducing injury and illness rates." In 1993, the company's incident rate in its North America facilities was 29 per 100 employees and the lost workday case rate was 4.5 per 100 employees, in line with other U.S. car makers, but many times higher than the country's most stellar industrial performers.

That year, a proactive Board of Directors determined to remedy the situation. They began by benchmarking those companies they hoped to emulate - including Alcoa, Allied Signal and others. The experience suggested a number of new strategies; but perhaps the most telling insight came from a visiting Alcoa expert, "You have the best safety programs I've ever seen, much better than ours. But Alcoa workers don't put their hands inside operating machines, and yours do. You have the programs, but we have the culture."

Thus began the effort to imbue GM with the sort of culture these other companies had, a culture that reinforced, supported and rewarded safe behavior. In the best GM tradition, the effort would come from the top down, with the Board of Directors setting an ambitious three-year goal of 50% reduction in incident and lost workday rates, and assigning responsibility for meeting these goals to the head operating group known as the MMC.

Working with Culture Change Consultants, the manufacturing managers were soon up to speed on what safety culture was all about; and they adopted a number of initiatives that would demonstrate their personal commitment to safety. Safety became an item on every agenda and part of every plant visit. The MMC also helped direct the implementation of a workshop for top plant management and local union leaders at all North American manufacturing facilities. In turn, these key plant people developed a safety leadership training course for their supervisory personnel. The course quickly became the primary vehicle for GM's safety culture change initiative, promoting common language and values throughout the company. The course, which takes place over two half-days, continues to be given today and is required of all new management and staff.

The results have been impressive. The company hit its three-year goal of 50% reduction in lost-time injuries and very nearly reached a 50% reduction in recordables; and has gone from there to enjoy eight straight years of continuous improvement. Today, GM's safety numbers rival and, in some cases surpass those of the companies that it benchmarked in 1994. By 2002, for example, the company had reduced the lost workday case rate in its North America facilities to 0.25 and its total recordable rate to 3.8 per 100 employees.

What accounts for this sustained improvement? The safety leadership course, while excellent, is not the answer. No course, program, or package by itself can change the culture of a company. Culture change is a long-term process (typically 5-7 years) that requires the visible and tangible commitment of leadership - management and labor alike. Joe Spielman, in a recent address to employees, credited past success to "an entirely new way of approaching safety at GM. We've learned that policies and programs alone don't equate to excellent in safety performance - but it has been a fundamental shift in our leadership approach to safety that has made such a dramatic difference." Then, demonstrating his profound understanding that safety culture needs to be forever implemented as an evergreen process, he went on to caution that "even though we've made some significant progress, we still have a long way to go."

**\*Culture Change Consultants partnered with the General Motors Manufacturing Managers Council in the implementation of its world-wide safety culture change process.**