



Owens Corning: System-Wide Culture Change One Village at a Time

In the early 1990s, management and safety professionals at Owens Corning devoted themselves to achieving world-class safety performance. They were particularly successful in the technical, administrative and programmatic sides of safety. The number and severity of accidents decreased. Still, they knew they could do much better.

In 1995, the Occupation Health & Safety Department (OH&S) identified achieving world-class stature in the “soft-side” of safety as a key, long-term objective; necessary to support excellence in the technical aspects. They brought in a number of experts and experimented with a variety of behavior-based safety packages—with mixed results. They observed that some plants were not as ready as others; improvement came only in specific areas, and results were often short-lived. According to Frank Cereghini, the corporate safety director, “We could see a pattern; behavior based programs failed wherever there was not a supportive culture.”

Culture Change Consultants was brought in to explain what would be involved in a long-term (5-7 year) safety culture change process. The OH&S department was impressed. At a subsequent meeting, the vice president of operations also signed on; and one plant manager eagerly volunteered his troubled facility as a pilot safety culture project. That’s where trouble began; at the very first meeting with a cross-section of plant personnel, the CCC consultant felt serious resistance. It turned out that, to plant workers, this was perceived as just another corporate flavor of-the-month program. They would be asked to jump through hoops and there would be no follow through and no pay-off.

Ordinarily, top management and safety professional support is enough to drive a culture change; but not where workers have grown cynical because of previous, incomplete efforts. The CCC Perception Survey™ indicated a serious disconnect between how management and hourly employees viewed each other and their respective attitudes about safety. Other plants, especially newer ones, had a much more positive attitude—as well as a better safety record.

The team agreed that without worker buy-in, the effort would be doomed to failure. Workers at the pilot plant were given the option of proceeding or not, and then made part of the planning process. Step by step, a level of trust was established and the culture change process was underway, beginning with the formation of safety teams made up of members from all levels of the plant.

Based on that experience, it was decided to proceed plant by plant—fifteen in all. At each, a baseline Safety Culture Assessment was undertaken. Based on the results, goals were determined and a plan devised—with the concurrence of the management and workers. No two facilities ended up with exactly the same prescription. Some plants set up permanent teams and underwent training in order to administer their own programs; others took part in Safety Culture Leadership Dialogues™, but did not set up teams. As word of initial successes spread, resistance across the system evaporated.

According to Cereghini, “We came to the realization that every plant was different; no packaged product or cookie-cutter approach was going to work. The ‘one-village-at-a-time’ culture change strategy allowed us to assess each facility and customize our solutions to the conditions of each local culture.”

And the results have been impressive. Not only have subsequent surveys indicated a dramatic turnaround in trust and shared values, but the accident/incident rates have also dropped markedly. And the results have been impressive. Not only have subsequent surveys indicated a dramatic turnaround in trust and shared values, but the accident/incident rates have also dropped markedly.

***Culture Change Consultants has implemented culture-based safety improvement strategies at 15 Owens Corning plants.**