



Can Speaking Up Keep Recordables Down?

In the Ball Corporation Walkill plant, homing in on psychological safety helped create an even safer physical environment.

At the Ball Corporation Aluminum Beverage Can Plant in Walkill, NY, something could have been better. With 165 employees effectively producing nearly two billion cans annually, safety was a top priority. They had all the right structures in place, and their number of safety incidents was already lower than what is typically seen in a manufacturing environment. But management thought there was room for improvement: they wanted to drive those numbers even lower.

Selected as one plant in a pilot program to assess the site safety culture, the Walkill plant engaged Culture Change Consultants to help them take a closer look at their plant's culture. Together, they set out to determine whether there was an opportunity to leverage culture to improve an already strong safety performance.

The Safety Culture Assessment revealed some interesting findings. First, many hourly employees shared perceptions of mistrust, and were reluctant to bring up safety concerns (or even negative information) for fear of repercussions. And second, management did not perceive the same issues regarding fear and trust that hourly employees did. In short, hourly employees and managers did not perceive the same level of psychological safety.

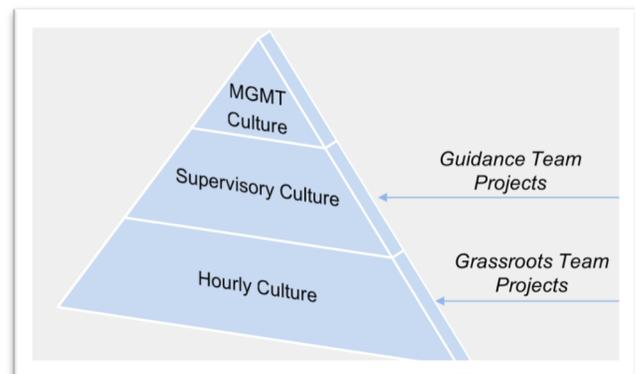
The Commitment

The Walkill plant recognized that they would have to look beyond equipment, procedures and facilities. They understood that their workplace was vulnerable to some negative cultural influences which were stifling trust and communication.

They first enlisted managers and key front-line leaders to form a Guidance Team (GT) whose role was to steer the overall safety culture change process at the site level, ensure alignment amongst leaders at all levels, and develop

projects to change supervisory and management culture.

The Walkill plant also established Grassroots Teams (GSTs), comprised of front-line employees who face safety issues daily. The GSTs' mission is to develop projects that improve the culture of the hourly workforce. It didn't take long before both teams began rolling out culture-based projects aimed at fostering open communication.



Culture Change Consultants also guided employees through two Breaking the Cycles of Mistrust® workshops, which are two-day, open and honest dialogues between work teams about the fears and assumptions which can impede communication.

The teams began by addressing the initial, assessment results which revealed wide perception gaps between the hourly and management workforce when it came to speaking up: when asked if bringing up safety issues was accepted in the plant, only 48% of the hourly workforce agreed as compared to 92% of people managers. When asked if safety incidents were talked about as opportunities to learn rather than to find fault or fix blame, only 24% of hourly respondents agreed versus 67% of people managers.

Both teams realized that reducing mistrust and fear could not be accomplished by the Guidance Team or Grassroots Safety Team alone, but that



this would require addressing issues at both the hourly and management level.



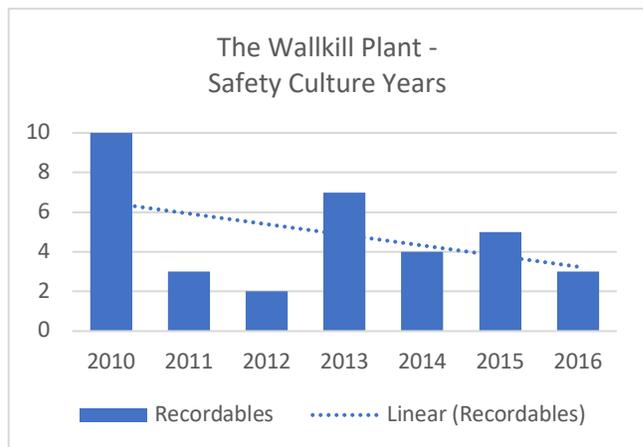
The Guidance Team designed a project to improve near-miss reporting with emphasis on addressing the unwanted norms that had developed over time and worked against a proactive approach to safety. The first step was to educate the workforce about the definition of a near miss and streamline the reporting process. The next steps centered largely on structured communication and providing positive feedback to those submitting a near miss.

The Grassroots Safety Team’s project inspired more effective and proactive safety walks, featuring a video with co-workers speaking up about safety issues and management providing positive feedback. Management’s participation in the video helped make employees aware that the Grassroots Safety Team’s initiative was supported at all levels.

The Results

When asked whether bringing up safety issues is accepted in the culture, a formal reassessment conducted in 2017 reflected that 33% more hourly employees responded positively. Similarly, when asked whether safety incidents are used as learning opportunities (rather than as blaming opportunities), 46% more hourly employees (and 20% more people managers) agreed. Near miss reporting is up, and employees raise safety issues for discussion more frequently.

The benefits of proactive prevention are also reflected in the site’s safety performance. It is not unusual for recordable incident rates to rise when organizations embark on a journey to bring up safety mistakes, near misses and actual incidents. With time however, these rates often begin to fall as employees feel safer to share without fear and issues are corrected before an incident occurs. Such is the case with the Walkkill plant, where the number of recordable incidents continues to trend downward over time.



Lessons Learned

Ball Corporation Walkkill realized that psychological safety is a necessary precursor to proactive prevention. The plant’s reduction in recordables has inspired a continued effort to shift the culture away from blame and toward an environment where employees feel safe to speak up.