

A pat on the back is worth 10 key chains

by Nancy Drew

Fans of the old television series "Hill Street Blues" undoubtedly can recall how every episode opened. At the end of the early morning briefing, as police officers downed the last of their donuts and coffee, the crusty yet compassionate sergeant repeated a benediction each day before his people hit the streets: "Let's be careful out there."

It's the same safety message that every industrial supervisor tries to impress upon his or her workers: Watch out for each other. Pay attention. But supervisors don't create a "culture" of safety in the workplace simply by delivering pep talks. Many organizations that have clearly defined safe procedures for given tasks now focus on human behavior as the key factor in injury prevention. After all, it's the employees who make those procedures work.

To achieve a safe work environment, supervisors need to know how to motivate their employees, be it through incentives, disincentives, rewards or empowerment.

Hot salsa and Frisbees

At Dow Chemical Co.'s Oyster Creek site in Freeport, Texas, managers turned the hierarchical tables on workers as a reward for exceeding a quarterly goal of 60-percent employee participation in the "Safe Working Styles" intervention program. They cooked and served fajitas to over 100 technicians.

The program encourages Dow employees to intervene when they see unsafe on-the-job behavior. It includes

one-day seminars, presented by their peers, that teach employees how to intervene with co-workers without alienating them. The company also encourages employees to report unsafe situations on "intervention" cards. The identity of the unsafe worker remains anonymous, though that of the individual reporting the situation does not. This lets Dow track potential hazards and reward employees who work proactively to identify areas of risk without putting individuals on the spot.

Each month at the Oyster Creek site, supervisors choose the two best cards submitted and reward the appropriate individuals with incentives, including mugs, gym bags or Frisbees. "These are just token gifts," says Gene Roberts, a safety specialist at the Oyster Creek site. "It's the recognition that counts."

The goal of the intervention cards, says Roberts, is not to punish employees who are caught working unsafely, but to identify dangers and alert coworkers to them. Instead of trying to force compliance with a "walk softly and carry a big stick" attitude, Roberts offers another suggestion. "Let's make a pencil out of that stick and write down how to fix a risky situation."

Workers respond to recognition

Positive reinforcement with rewards is only one tool to motivate employees to care about safety, says Greg Dickson, a former line supervisor and now corporate director of safety for Dow. While he doesn't use the buzzwords "empowerment" or "ownership," Dickson nonetheless



describes a Dow safety culture based on those qualities. Morning gatherings where technicians discuss upcoming projects promote camaraderie. Small work teams assess new jobs and take responsibility for discussing what might go wrong. And open communication between all levels (subordinates are encouraged to intervene when appropriate with superiors) contributes to a common commitment to safety.

Negative reinforcement also has its place, says Dickson. "If a rule is very important to protect individuals in the workplace, then the balance of consequences must be appropriate if somebody violates that rule," he says. A closed-door session with the supervisor may be in order, or a job change or time off for a repeat violator. "We make sure we act on the positive side as often as we can," he says.

"In the performance reviews first line supervisors do, safety is one of the key criteria we evaluate," adds Dickson.

The use of incentives, like flashlights and smoke detectors, is most helpful when a company starts a new program. "As your safety culture gets more and more established, gifts become less important. You want to work safely," says Dickson.

Gifts cost more than you think

Henry Sarkis, safety consultant and president of the Miami-based Reliability Group, believes the use of monetary and gift incentives can sometimes backfire. "We are not specifically against safety incentives, but a problem arises when a company says, 'Our total safety program is going to be incentive based, for prizes.' Incentives can run the gamut from belt buckles to the trip to Hawaii. I've seen vehicles given away to the person who goes so many hours without an accident," says Sarkis.

When companies assume they must increase the money or prize ante, he says, they tend to drive injuries underground. "There's always the possibility, particularly with a group safety award, that as the incentive gets more significant people will cover up incidents and not report them," he says. "In one organization where someone had a broken leg in a manufacturing plant, co-workers propped him up and got him through the day." He went home and claimed the injury occurred off the property.

To be effective, incentives and recognition need not be money or gifts, says Sarkis. "Employees are very proud, for example, that the chairman of United Technologies flies in by company helicopter to kick off the yearly supervisor safety training sessions," says Sarkis. "That's the kind of commitment is legendary."