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Apparent Costs of Implementing and Maintaining a Safety Culture

Safety measures include costs for training, equipment, and implementing safety protocols. Mistakenly, some individuals may view these costs as burdensome expenses and meaningless paperwork exercises rather than investments in the genuine well-being of workers and the long-term success of the company and its projects. These erroneous perceptions are the direct result of a failure of leadership in implementing, monitoring, and communicating the elements necessary to create a climate of safety.

Almost all of the individual Executive Insights in the NAC Safety Culture Series underline the importance of leadership and provide advice as to appropriate leadership behaviors and actions. Some common employee misconceptions which negatively affect implementation of a safety culture and thus the ability to accomplish the profitability benefits resulting from a strong safety culture are:

Perception of priorities: In some cases, the primary focus of management might appear to be on meeting regulatory requirements or avoiding legal liabilities rather than genuinely prioritizing the safety and well-being of workers.

Bureaucratic overload: When safety practices are perceived as overly bureaucratic or require extensive documentation and paperwork, workers may feel that the emphasis is being placed on satisfying administrative tasks rather than promoting practical safety measures.

Lack of understanding: Some individuals may not fully understand the rationale behind safety practices. They might see them as unnecessary hindrances to efficiency and productivity rather than as essential measures to prevent accidents and protect them and their fellow workers. This is especially true if workers are not directly involved in establishing and improving the practices.

Cultural factors: Workers may come from a background where their prior work culture does not reward questioning authority and where speed and productivity were prioritized over safety. In such environments, safety practices may be seen as impediments to getting the job done quickly.

Observations of Benefit to Profitability

Productivity and safety are seamlessly intertwined in the workplace. To spend time and energy on safety not only improves safety performance, but it also improves productivity and thus profitability.

In 2022-2023, NAC organized five symposia at different universities on “Introducing Safety Culture Concepts in Undergraduate Education” (<https://www.naocon.org/wp-content/uploads/NAC-Safety-Culture-Symposia-Recap.pdf>). Each symposia had a panel of engineering and construction company experts who espoused the benefits of a safety culture, providing proof of its dramatic improvement on worker safety. They also stressed the

presented of 58 construction companies with strong safety cultures that have reached a string of over one million hours worked without a recordable injury.

The National Safety Council (NSC) reports, "Each prevented lost-time injury or illness saves \$37,000, and each avoided occupational fatality saves \$1,390,000. Investors are increasingly using workplace safety and health measures to screen out underperforming stocks, and are showing stronger returns for doing so." (<https://www.nsc.org/getmedia/d81515ce-57ba-4347-821e-4af731076260/journey-to-safety-excellence-safety-business->

company's reputation, and profit. Documented evidence demonstrates that a strong safety culture's benefits far exceed the costs associated with implementing and maintaining a strong safety culture. Leadership is critical to assure that staff at

About the Author

Ken Arnold was elected to the National Academy of Construction in 2014. In his 55-year career in oil and gas for Shell and as founder and CEO of a mid-size project engineering and project management company, he has been recognized by the National Academy of Engineering,