

TerranearPMC Safety Share

Week of December 16, 2013 – It's Up to Us!

Every once-in-a-while, when asked to present a safety topic at a meeting or other type of gathering, I begin with the question, "What would you do if while you were getting ready to take off on a plane and you found out the pilot and co-pilot were going to fly the plane the same way you drive your car?" I see an array of reactions around the room. Some people get a guilty look on their face while others are stoic and refuse to give any reaction at all. Some start to giggle while others just bury their heads in their lap. Without saying another word, it is clear my point has been made. For the most part, we know that we could all drive a little safer and a lot more conscientiously than we do.

A few years back, an airplane was headed from the west coast towards Minnesota's twin cities. Apparently after passing their destination by about 150 miles, the pilot and co-pilot corrected their course and notified the airport that they would be delayed. It turns out the two men in the cockpit were playing video games and got more than just a little caught up in their entertainment. The event made the front pages and was worth a few days of conversation on CNN while both the pilot and co-pilot were faced with immediate termination. The reaction from the press and general public was condemning. People voiced tremendous concern over such behavior. Yet no one was hurt, nor was any person aboard the plane ever in any type of danger. The airplane crew simply turned on the autopilot while they diverted their attention from boredom. But the outcry over passenger safety in the sky echoed far and wide.

I think we all know that texting and driving is dangerous. This is one activity, right along with drinking and driving, where the evidence is overwhelming that such an activity is placing, not just the driver; but passengers as well as fellow drivers, at risk. Yet, unfortunately, even after a strong national anti-texting campaign (TV ads, radio announcements, etc), texting and driving is still an ongoing problem (not to mention talking on cell phones and driving).

We humans can be very forgiving of our own personal shortcomings, as we think we perceive and understand the specific situations for which we are confronted; and if we fail at the task at hand, or cause something to go wrong, we're quick to defend our actions through a litany of excuses based on the difficulties and challenges we faced. Meanwhile our tolerance level seems to decline steeply through a lack of appreciation for others' difficulties and challenges. Could it be a matter of control? For instance, don't we all feel more comfortable about our safety in a car when we are at the wheel, rather than someone else? Even if we know the driver is responsible and careful, there is still a little nervousness when we see the driver changing lanes or making a turn when we, if driving, would not have chosen the same action.

It seems that the relationship between humans and control is a little complicated. We all know people who get offended when they are told to do something - even if they know it's the right thing to do, such as, "don't text and drive!" "I can text while watching the road." "I've done it hundreds of times without a problem." "maybe you can't, but I can!"



I remember one person telling me that the reason he refuses to wear a seat belt is that he wouldn't be able to jump out of his car fast enough in the event that he was going to crash! ..really! Maybe this is an extreme example of a person not wanting to be told what to do. But, there seems to be resistance when being instructed to do OR not to do something.

Over the years, safety and health professionals have learned that telling people what to do doesn't get things done the way their instruction was intended to be. Of course, while the safety guy is onsite, hard hats and safety glasses will be worn or persons will inspect a piece of heavy equipment (instead of the all-too-familiar pencil-whipping technique), but as soon as S&H leave the area, business as usual rules the day. So after many years of pushing safety down everyone's throat, the concept of empowerment began to take shape. Empowerment?! This is the process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes.

A typical empowering tool in the S&H industry is the safety committee, where those that perform the work have a voice in identifying hazards and the proper controls that should be used. Performing a simple 2-minute drill, where the entire task team performs a visual inspection of their work area prior to performing work, is another example of empowerment. In this method, persons take the opportunity to identify unsafe conditions and then, must be responsible to communicate such conditions to the rest of the crew so that everyone is aware of the hazard, and, as a group, decide the best mitigation method.

Understand, empowerment is not a tool where individuals can work outside the box by themselves without responsibility or accountability. Empowerment is a team effort. In addition, S&H professionals still play a vital role in an organization's S&H program. They are the subject-matter-experts and a resource for empowered groups and individuals so that employees understand the applicable rules and regulations. An example is providing information regarding the pros and cons of using respiratory protection as well as the proper respirator selection. Empowerment becomes important so that all individuals understand and take responsibility for maintaining the cleanliness of their respirator and wearing it correctly and understand when they need to seek additional subject matter expertise from the S&H staff.

Empowerment can be a very effective method to ensure employee safety and health is a top priority and it provides a voice for individuals while promoting a team effort!

It is not true that people stop pursuing dreams because they grow old, they grow old because they stop pursuing dreams

Gabriel García Márquez

(Colombian novelist, short-story writer, screenwriter and journalist)

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