



## WORDS ON WISE MANAGEMENT

### Workplace safety really does matter

by Jerry Glass

For many organizations, workplace safety guidelines are included in the company's employee handbook. However, just because a policy is written in a handbook doesn't always mean it's put into practice. Failure to "practice what you preach" can result in unnecessary injuries, lost productivity, increased absenteeism, higher workers' compensation costs, and potential legal costs.

Many organizations don't recognize that implementing a first-rate safety program costs less than any financial penalty associated with workers' comp benefits, lost productivity, or indirect or direct legal fees. Safety programs can be cost-effective and easy to implement, and they all start with senior management's involvement.

An organization's senior management has a huge impact on whether workplace safety will cost the employer money, create a bad reputation in the employer's industry, and reduce sales or services to its customers. Among other things, senior management is responsible for (1) making workplace safety its number-one priority, (2) communicating the importance of keeping employees safe and injury-free, and (3) training frontline supervisors on how to influence positive safety behaviors. Frontline supervisors are critical to a successful workplace safety process, but they will enforce safe behavior only if management requires them to do so.

#### *Consequences of unsafe workplaces*

Employers that don't make workplace safety a priority can find themselves facing other issues:

- (1) **Legal troubles.** As workplace safety continues to be a problem, employers face emerging standards and increased regulatory and legal pressures by state mandates and organizations such as the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), and the Arizona Industrial Commission. Thus, you should be doing everything you can to reduce legal exposure.
- (2) **Unionization of employees.** In addition to today's increased legal pressures and governmental oversight in health and safety, today's unions

have more access to employees and can more easily influence and recruit unhappy workers through social media and the Internet. If workers don't believe management is interested in providing a safe working environment, they will turn to other organizations (e.g., unions), which will demand that the workplace is safe and secure. As long as unions have been around, they have championed worker safety as a core value.

- (3) **Decreased productivity and ROI.** Studies show that a safe workplace improves productivity, decreases absenteeism, and helps lower insurance costs. However, the pressure of meeting deadlines and beating the competition sometimes can take precedence over understanding how much job-related injuries cost the company. In some situations, members of management may decide—either consciously or unconsciously—to tolerate the cost of workplace injuries because they don't see enough of a significant return on investment (ROI) to change the behavior that led to those injuries.

At the end of the day, people just want to be treated with respect and know their concerns are being addressed. By making workplace safety a top priority, organizations have a significant opportunity to show their employees what true leadership means. In addition, an employer that effectively addresses safety concerns is considered an employer of choice.

Workplace safety must become a priority for many reasons. The key to all effective safety programs is making sure management understands the value of worker safety and requiring basic attention to the types of behaviors that are needed to prevent injuries. When management reinforces those behaviors in a positive way, employees will respond favorably. When that occurs, on-the-job injuries are reduced, tensions between labor and management fade, and morale—and the company's profits—increase.



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