

Can a safe workplace be designed before the start of business in a new facility or should operations be ongoing in order to observe safety hazards and implement a company's safety procedures?

Agnew: A company can begin to establish a proactive safety culture by establishing leading indicators for safety before moving into a new building. How safety is measured determines how safety is managed.

Tell us what goes into creating safe physical working conditions.

Agnew: When designing workspaces, it is important to assess whether we are setting up people to be safe physically and do their jobs safely. For example, any piece of equipment is going to need repair and preventive maintenance. The design of that equipment determines if maintenance can be conducted in a safe manner. Ergonomics also needs to be considered. Will the design affect how employees stretch, twist, turn, and perform functions that require repetitive motion?

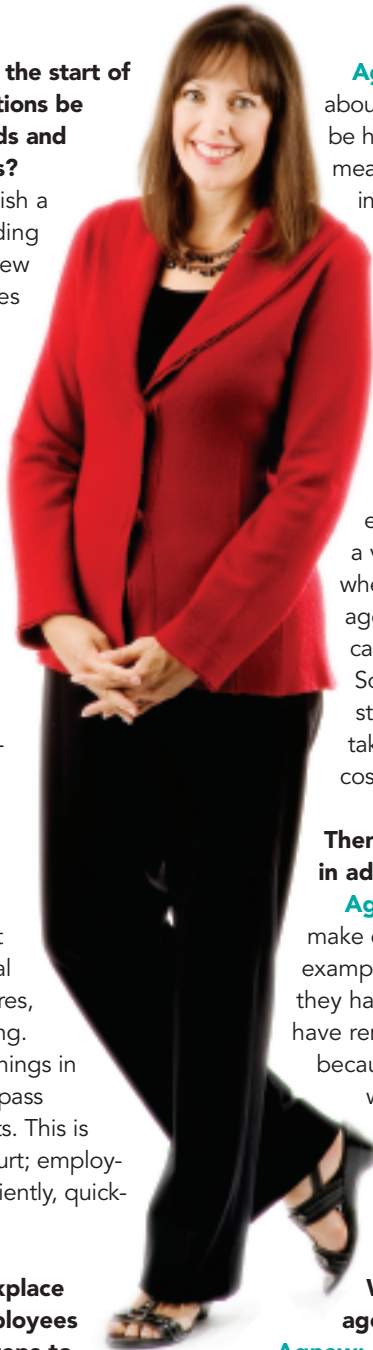
What are the most serious risks to personnel safety and process safety?

Agnew: Human behavior poses the most serious risk. We can create the safest physical environment with the best policies, procedures, equipment, safety controls, and safety training. When you add human beings, they will do things in ways you did not predict. Employees will bypass safety guards and take other safety short cuts. This is not done because employees want to get hurt; employees are attempting to get the job done efficiently, quickly, and with quality.

You have said "creating a truly safe workplace requires developing a culture where employees are willing to speak up." What are the steps to creating this kind of culture? What factors inhibit an employee from speaking up?

Agnew: Managers and supervisors only see a fraction of what goes on around safety. They need employees to report hazards and near misses. However, when employees speak up and nothing happens, they give up. This is called "extinction." In addition, the fear of being reprimanded or losing one's job causes employees to remain silent. If leaders want at-risk behaviors reported they cannot beat up employees when they report.

How can safety be encouraged when pressures and deadlines discourage its development?



Agnew: Managers talk about productivity but talk about safety less often. They do not want anyone to be hurt, but when they focus on production as a measure and an incentive, workers get the distinct impression that safety is not important. Managers need to say, "Here are some ways you can stay safe out there." Instead they often only say, "We need to produce this amount today." Put more focus on safe behavior and celebrate with your employees when they show improvement.

Why do managers make poor decisions about safety?

Agnew: They don't understand why people engage in at-risk behavior. They show employees a video on proper lifting and then are puzzled when they don't continue to lift properly. Until managers understand why at-risk behaviors occur, they cannot make good decisions to correct them. Some organizations think they lack the funds to study human behavior; however, organizations that take a look at the price of accidents realize that it costs more to ignore the science of behavior.

Then how can managers make sound decisions in adverse conditions?

Agnew: Fluency is the key. Fluency is the ability to make decisions quickly and without hesitation. For example, pilots have many checklists and procedures they have to follow. Pilots are fluent not because they have remembered every item on every checklist, but because they know which safety checklists to pull out when a situation occurs. We cannot practice safety by reading a book or sitting through a lecture. If we wait for an actual incident to happen, it is difficult to practice fluency. We cannot be fluent without built-in practice.

What are the most obvious signs that management is gambling with safety?

Agnew: Among these are organizations that focus on lagging indicators such as incident rates. The trap is that after one year of few or no incidents, organizations believe they have safety under control when it may be that they have just been lucky. In today's companies the unsafe conditions and at-risk behaviors that still exist only occasionally result in accidents. That means they can go for periods of time with no accidents just through luck. Unless safe and at-risk behavior is measured, an organization may be relying on luck. We call this "safe by accident."

In your book, you discuss Behavior Based Safety (BBS). Can you explain that term?

Agnew: BBS is about identifying behaviors needed to stay safe and creating systems to encourage people to do those behaviors consistently. With BBS, we are looking at why people are not following safety procedures (e.g., not wearing hearing protection), understanding the reasons for unsafe behavior, and creating better strategies to correct it. Is hearing protection not worn because it is uncomfortable? Is it time-consuming to adhere to safety procedures?

Most companies conduct a Job Hazard Analysis (JHA). Explain what that constitutes.

Agnew: A JHA consists of stopping before you do a job and identifying hazards of the task. This is especially important for infrequent tasks. A JHA is designed to make people think about what needs to be done to keep safe on the job; it is not designed to find fault. JHAs do not have to be lengthy unless the job is big. You can conduct a mini-JHA by answering a few questions before starting a job.

Can you describe a safety leadership strategy that does not work?

Agnew: One strategy that does not work is the implementation of injury-based incentive programs that reward employees for going a period of time without accidents. There are three ways to earn such incentives: (1) employees behave safely and do what they are supposed to do; (2) they engage in at-risk behavior but are lucky and do not have accidents; or (3) they do not report accidents. It is better to focus on reinforcing safe behavior to reduce accidents.

THE ASSIGNMENT

Dr. Judy Agnew has more than 19 years of consulting experience and a Ph.D. in Applied Behavior Analysis. She is recognized as a thought leader in the field of behavioral safety and performance management and is the author of *Safe by Accident* (with Aubrey Daniels), published November 2010, and *Removing Obstacles to Safety* (with Gail Snyder). Dr. Agnew partners with clients at Aubrey Daniels (www.aubreydaniels.com) to create behavior-based interventions for maintaining safe work environments. In this issue, she shares her expertise with *Area Development's* readers.