How to Assess the Role of Company Culture in Creating Safe Workplaces – Sponsored by Avetta

Recognizing the Factors that Lead to Risk Tolerance

Reducing accidents requires that companies recognize not just hazards in the workplace but also the factors that lead workers to incorrectly respond to those hazards. Based on my own research following the crash, I was able to identify several conditions that lead to excessive risk tolerance in a work environment. Moments of Impact outlines 10 factors; for the purposes of this paper, we will explore just a few:

1. Perception of Control. Our own perception that we have control over our environment can lead us to take far greater risk than is justifiable. For instance, most people feel safer in their own cars than they do in passenger jet despite the fact that driving is more dangerous than flying (my own experience notwithstanding). We feel like we're in control when driving, which gives us a false sense of security. In the workplace, people commonly fall victim to this thinking and believe themselves to have more control over their environment than they do. Cell tower climbers, for example, are notoriously overconfident – as a result, they often fail to take the proper precautions.
2. Experience with An Outcome. When a task involves a certain amount of risk and people performing the task have a positive outcome, they are more likely to accept the risk and repeat the task. The success creates a sense of confidence and mastery even when it's unjustified, the way a gambler feels when he's hit a hot streak. The result is overconfidence and increased risk tolerance. And it can be dangerous for others as well. An experienced worker may become a model for younger, less seasoned employees who see risky behavior without appreciating all the subtle steps the more experienced person takes to manage that risk.
3. Pressure to Perform. Managers often exert pressure on employees in subtle ways that they're unaware of, or that have unintended consequences. Under these conditions, employees and contractors can cut corners or take other risks to meet a manager's or company's goals, especially to meet a deadline or budget requirements. In my own example, I can say with confidence that each of us on my flight, including the pilot, felt some kind of pressure to continue in spite of the risk. I recall feeling pressure to meet career goals, pressure to get to our destination and relieve the men who had been away from their families, and pressure not to disappoint others on the plane.

These factors can be indicative of a cultural tendency toward excessive risk tolerance. They can be both more pervasive and more difficult to recognize within an organization. However, the fact that they are difficult to identify doesn’t mean they are impossible to identify. And once they’re recognized, companies can take steps to minimize the factors that contribute to excessive risk tolerance.

Source: Avetta