



Why Do Workers Choose To Get Hurt or Killed?

Insights

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They may not know it at the time, but workers (and companies) make choices that result in workplace accidents. While there are many contributing factors to workplace accidents, on some level, bad decisions were made.

J. A. Rodriguez recently wrote an interesting article *"Fatalities at West Fertilizer Company: Was the Enemy of Safety Responsible?"* explaining how workers engage in *"incremental rationalization"* to bit by bit justify ultimately disastrous decisions. He analogizes to our common incremental justification for violating a diet, in which the rationalization proceeds from, *"I know I shouldn't have it"* to *"maybe just this once,"* to *"I deserve this,"* and so forth.

I have been associated with almost 500 workplace fatalities and my partner, Ed Foulke, another 200 or so. We have analyze these accidents, and close to 70% involved errors by well trained personnel. Most of those individuals were described as solid good people, among the best in the Company, devoted family men, and in similar terms.

And yet they made decisions which caused or contributed to their death, and in settings such as confined space entry cases, perhaps the deaths of others.

The common explanation is that we all become *"nonchalant"* about hazards to which we are daily exposed. However, Mr. Rodriguez has further explained this seeming nonchalance by explaining that this mindset gradually develops over time.

Companies and their leaders share the blame for allowing a culture that tolerates this attitude. Sometimes entire businesses may engage in this stealthily creeping *"incremental rationalization."*

I frequently refer to *"guy disease"*. . . the seemingly endless capacity of males to make unwise and unsafe decisions despite clearly knowing better. Sorry guys . . . women may be open to criticism on other fronts, but they simply do not as readily by-pass steps, cut corners, or just plain make bone-headed mistakes. But even we chromosomally challenged males didn't start cutting corners and becoming nonchalant about major safety issues... we got there slowly.

Corporate Leaders Must Maintain A Culture To Continually Remind Workers To Work Safely

It comes back to that oft used, seldom understood term, *"culture."* It is incumbent on corporate leaders to create the type of culture in which employees are continually reminded to pause, think,

and make wise safety decisions. Continuously experiment; keep it interesting. Repetition is a good thing.

Almost all executives state that safety is their first priority, and generally they mean it. However, many of the same leaders do not know much about their safety processes, and are not focusing on safety in the same fashion they work to obtain the corporation's other goals.

After experiencing a workplace fatality, serious injury, or large OSHA citation, executives may quickly grasp that it's their responsibility to *"change the safety culture."* We all know *"where the buck stops."* But what is their culture...?

The employer first needs to determine their safety culture, and few employers utilize one of the most effective tools – an employee safety attitude survey. A recent Fisher Phillips survey of some of the most safety-conscious employers found that only 16% regularly use such surveys.

We use such surveys in other contexts, so why not use them for safety as well? HR-driven employee attitude surveys are less effective without safety inquiries, so perhaps questions about the safety culture can be incorporated into existing tools.

We'll discuss employee safety culture surveys in our next blog.

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