Becoming A Culture Change Agent – The Inside Story of the 3-Day Course
By Dan Estow

You are a member of your plant's safety committee. After several years of gradual gains, the safety performance at your company, General Widget, and your facility have reached a plateau; and no amount of effort can make the needle budge. Corporate has decided on a new initiative—a long-term safety culture change program (whatever that is)—and your plant manager has selected you and two others (one manager, one supervisor, and one hourly employee) to attend a three-day crash course so that you can become a leader in the new effort.

You travel to a scenic, historical town on a broad river. It is autumn and the leaves are beginning to turn. The inn you are staying at is charming, the food delicious, and the view terrific. But you only have a short time to enjoy the amenities since work, work, work seems to be the order of the day. That first night you enjoy meeting some of the other 25 attendees over a light buffet supper before the first session of the course begins. You work steadily from Tuesday night until Friday noon—albeit with frequent breaks and evening pleasures—when the course concludes and you make the journey home, tired but exhilarated to enjoy the weekend with your family.

Back at work on Monday, your co-workers needle you good-naturedly about your boondoggle. You go along with the kidding, even exaggerating the delights of the trip. At the first safety committee meeting, however, things take a turn for the worse. You sense some bad feeling in the room as you and the others report on the course. They have seen you three singled out for this perquisite and they are more than a little envious and suspicious. Their defensive action is to receive the report with skepticism and resistance. They imply that they think it is another "flavor of the month" program and that culture change is some touchy-feely fad from California.

In turn, you and the other attendees perceive how much flak you are receiving and it makes you a little bitter, considering all the hard work you have put in. Your defensive action is to exclude those naysayers from having any significant role in the new culture change process. You leave them off the new grassroots safety teams you are setting up. The heck with them; you will do it without them.

Of course, they see you excluding them and they begin to sabotage your efforts, bad-mouthing you and the safety program to their co-workers. Support fizzles. The long-term culture change process deteriorates into a flavor-of-the-month, and at least at your plant, it begins to go into cardiac arrest.

How do you bring it back to life? How do you break the Cycles of Mistrust that threaten to kill your new and promising safety effort? At some point, between the negative perception and the related defensive action, the cycle needs to be broken. At what point and how?

Back to Reality

General Widget is not a real company nor a real case, but it could be. It is also an example of the type of exercise that was recently enacted at the real life crash course entitled “Implementing Culture Change through Grassroots Safety Leadership: The Three-Day Course,” that was conducted by Culture Change Consultants (CCC) in Lambertville, New Jersey, on the banks of the Delaware River, for 28 operations managers, EHS professionals, and hourly workers from 10 companies from across the country. Steven I. Simon, Ph.D. and Harvey J. Liss, Ph.D. were the two principal instructors. They offer the course a couple of times a year to budding change leaders from companies that are starting or are in the midst of the safety culture change process. They have recently gone bi-coastal and now offer the course in California as well.

According to Simon, “We hold workshops on various subjects at client sites. But our three-day course has the advantage of allowing people to share ideas with those from other organizations, in different stages of development. In its own way, it is a kind of watering hole for safety culture change leaders. Although no two organizations have the same culture, they all face similar challenges.”

Paul Napoli, manager of the transmission division for Public Service Electric & Gas (PSE&G) of New Jersey, shared a recent real-life Cycle of Mistrust example with the gathering. A two-year veteran of the culture change wars, Napoli and his team had been trying for months to encourage workers to report their near-miss experiences so that hazards could be ameliorated and accidents avoided. Fearful of negative repercussions—because near misses often involve that same kind of misjudgements and short-cuts that cause reportable accidents—workers had been reluctant to step forward in the past. The team had made significant progress, but all that was put into jeopardy by a single incident.

One night a worker nearly fell into an open pit that had been dug the day before. The pit had been covered and protected, but apparently the covering had been removed. He reported the near-miss to the safety committee and the EHS supervisor called the manager. In turn, the manager, who felt he had been bypassed in the reporting process and made to look bad, called in the site supervisor, and ordered him to get to the bottom of it. Called on the carpet, so to speak, by his boss, the site supervisor interrogated the worker rather roughly. The worker, feeling that he had been set up, spread the word that reporting near-misses was a BIG mistake. Months of work were at risk because of a bad case of “telephone.” Fortunately, Napoli found out about it that first day and immediately jumped on it. “I think I spoke to nearly everyone in the group before the day was done,” Napoli says. “In the end no blame was assessed, no fault found. We just tried to get the facts and correct the situation. If you don’t stop rumors right away, you can be chasing them for years.”

Rumors, myths, stories, legends are important elements of culture. At one site, Simon conducted a focus group that cited horror stories about their safety culture, which, it transpired, had all occurred years before any of them had started working for the company. Sometimes, perception is more powerful than truth. That’s why the culture change process often begins with CCC’s validated perception survey. If workers believe management doesn’t care about their safety, for instance, they react accordingly, even if the manager does care. Simon cites one caring and concerned plant manager who was so upset by the results of the survey that he sent away the consultant in a huff. Talk about blaming the messenger. Much better to face the situation and try to change the

underlying perceptions and norms that stand in the way of safety improvement—whether they are true or not.

Defining Cultural Norms

One of the hardest concepts to grasp about safety culture change is also one of the simplest: What is culture as it applies to safety? Even some experienced hands have trouble, at first, shedding their former orientation. From years of working on the 3 E's—engineering, education, and enforcement—they may have trouble making the leap to working on the soft/human/cultural side of safety.

Simon and Liss throw out a variety of metaphors to help attendees grasp the difference. If you think of safety as a stew, the traditional elements of safety are the solid ingredients, i.e. the meat and vegetables, and the culture is the broth in which they simmer. If you have a rotten broth, you can't have a good stew—even if you keep adding the most expensive ingredients.

General Motors, for instance, had one of the best-funded safety programs in the country, but they were stuck in a safety performance rut. Frustrated, they benchmarked with some of the most successful companies in the country. One Alcoa observer put his analysis succinctly: "You have some of the best safety programs I have ever seen, much better than ours, but our employees don't put their hands in moving equipment. You have the programs, but we have the culture." After changing their focus to culture, GM has shown eight years of continuous improvement, has won numerous safety awards, and has surpassed the performance of some of their benchmarking peers.

The iceberg is another popular analogy and tool that is taught at the three-day course. The 10 percent above the water is what you see and can and try to address; the 90 percent below the surface is not readily apparent, but can easily sink your ship. Examples abound. One company had a strict lock-out/tag-out policy about servicing equipment, which was neither being followed nor enforced. That was the tip of the iceberg. Underneath was a host of norms and assumptions that was undermining the policy, e.g. I've done it a 100 times and not gotten hurt. It takes too long. We have to take some risks to get the job done. I have to go too far to shut it down. If I take too long, my supervisor will get on my case. Until the assumptions were changed, cooperation with the policy could never occur.

Case studies can often help to point out cultural issues. Robin Cabanos attended the course as a representative of GE I&RS, which has 65 worldwide and 35 national shops that repair power generating equipment. After several years making sure that all shops had uniform policies and procedures and excellent and equal training, the corporate EHS group was dismayed to see the wide range of safety performance among their sites—from excellent to truly dismaying. After eliminating possible variables, they came to the inevitable conclusion that it was a matter of culture. After working with 11 of their worst shops on culture, their combined lost-time injuries the first year went from 22 to 0.

The instructors emphasize that while such early success is possible, changing culture is really a five-to-seven year process. When you think about the persistent power of 20-year-old stories, you can see why. On the plus side, when you do manage to create a more positive culture, it can sustain itself for a long, long time.

Leadership, Leadership, Leadership
If the three most important things in real estate are location, location, location, then the three most important things in safety culture change are leadership, leadership, leadership.

Simon and Liss stress leadership, at all levels of the organization. "You need leaders among management, supervisors, and bargaining unit employees," Simon says. "But it is better to have strong leaders—wherever you find them—than to try to have equal representation from every unit and group."

Depending on the organization, top-down leadership can often be the most powerful. Coors Brewing Company sent three representatives. According to EHS manager Jere Zimmerman, their cultural issues were pretty evident. "Overall, we are on a par with our peers in the brewing industry. But we have some of the best plants in the country, as well as the very worst, which points out the severe cultural differences. Fortunately, our senior leadership is behind this initiative and that should be a powerful driver." Dennis Puffer, the vice president in charge of brewery operations and Robb Caseria, vice president in charge of container operations, are enthusiastic supporters. They, along with their staffs and plant managers, will be attending a day-and-a-half long safety leadership training course, to be conducted by CCC.

At Lawrence Livermore Laboratories, on the other hand, safety leadership came from the grassroots, from a group of crafts people in a single division. In spite of the fact that the movement has spread to all parts of the facility and even become national in scope (they hold a well-attended annual convention and maintain a popular web-site), they are still true to their roots.

Greg Kanych is a mechanic A with Con Edison in the Bronx, New York. A Vietnam veteran, trained as a machinist, Kanych is outspoken and assertive, especially when it comes to the issue of safety. Asked by management to be on his shop's grassroots safety committee, he was surprised to find he had leadership capabilities. "I never thought of myself as a leader," he laughs. "But I guess I am." A gregarious individual, Kanych felt that the best part of the course was meeting people from all over the spectrum. "There are some smart, interesting people here. We can learn a lot from each other."

No Two are Alike
Manufacturing facilities, shops and assembly plants are like snowflakes, in that no two are alike. Even when, like the GE I&RS shops, they do the same work on the same equipment, the culture can be radically different. Culture, after all, is incredibly complex. In one iceberg exercise, a group identified more than 20 cultural norms that influence workers' use of safety glasses. Still, there are lessons to be learned from the experience of others. Over the course of three days, many shared their experiences with the group.

Jim Zehmer, a manager with Toyota in Long Beach, talked about how hard it is to change even some of the most basic behaviors. "We've tried for a year to get people to wear seatbelts, on forklifts and company vehicles. They'll wear them in their personal vehicles and insist their families wear them, but on the job it's different. It's ironic that they won't take the time, while

management wants them to. They probably feel that time and numbers are more important to us, but that truly isn't the case. It's a perception we have to change."

The customer service group for PSE&G had almost the exact experience. Meter readers, because they are in and out of their cars so often hate to take the extra ten seconds to buckle up. John Anderson is the vice president in charge of the group. They are in the early stages of the safety culture change process. He and two of his hourly employees, Stephen Wythe and Dwight McKenna, attended the course so that they could get off to a running start. They were also communicating with other PSE&G groups that had been working on culture with CCC for as long as four years, to hear about their experiences and share best practices.

The Group Experience: Hands-on Training

If leadership is the hand that wields the tools, the culture safety teams are the hammers and chisels that craft the work. At a typical site, there will be a Guidance Team (GT) and multiple Grassroots Safety Teams (GSTs), usually corresponding to different shifts or areas of a plant. The GT, made up largely of management, union leadership and EHS professionals exists to guide and support the GSTs, to approve projects, provide resources, and run interference (if necessary) with senior management.

In order to provide the richest possible experience, Simon and Liss alternate didactic segments of the course with hands-on group exercises that, in many ways, simulate the team function. According to Liss, "Steve and I could probably talk non-stop for three days. He's the father of safety culture change. He's been doing it twenty years and probably knows more about it than anyone in the world; and I, with all due modesty, am a heck of a raconteur. And while our audience might be entertained, we think they learn much more from being active and doing."

After dividing the class into tables, i.e. groups/teams, Simon and Liss lead a variety of exercises—interspersed among their presentations. There is an iceberg exercise to help people distinguish between observed actions and underlying influences and norms. There is a cooking class (not really) about what goes into the safety stew—what are the ingredients, i.e. the traditional elements of safety and what is the broth, i.e. the culture. Just as the ingredients affect the flavor of the broth, the broth (the culture) flavors the meat and potatoes (the safety program). There is a focus group simulation exercise, which helps students learn how to analyze data from the perception survey, pick out areas of concern, and find explanations and possibly strategies. And then there is the popular, and often noisy, cycle-of-mistrust exercise, which sometimes becomes the death spiral of mistrust.

Naturally, there is a leadership exercise, where the group identifies positive and negatives actions taken by leaders at all levels—corporate management, union officials, plant management, supervisors, and hourly employees. The trick is to differentiate between programs and individual actions, those that anyone in an organization can take to affect, negatively or positively, the safety culture. In that vein, Simon tells the story of a GM general manager who tried to answer that question about himself. He kept talking about the things "we" had accomplished. "That's all very well," Simon told him, "but, aside from supporting others, what have you personally done to promote safety?" He was stumped for an answer. When he answered the question, he became a

"transformational" leader, an individual capable of transforming the safety culture of his organization.

Groups have a life of their own. Natural leaders often come to the fore during the team exercises. Without much encouragement, someone takes the role of spokesperson, somebody else is the recording secretary. Roles of critic, crank, and clown are sometimes also filled. Regardless of the mixing and matching that is done to achieve group balance, every table has its own distinct character—just like in real life. Some are functional and some are deliberately dysfunctional; all can benefit from the coaching provided by the staff. Eventually, many of the course attendees will become members of their company's guidance teams and, in turn, be selected to act as coach to a grassroots teams. As such, these experiences are invaluable.

Perhaps the toughest exercise is the last. The entire class is broken up into one guidance team and a number of grassroots safety teams. In a short period of time, the grassroots teams are supposed to 1) identify a number of key cultural issues, 2) prioritize them according to impact and ease of implementation, 3) pick one and define the problem in one simple declarative sentence, 4) conduct an iceberg analysis, 5) conduct a cycle of mistrust analysis, 6) design solutions with measurable goals, and 7) develop a complete project that conforms to specific culture enhancement requirements. They then present their project to the guidance team which asks questions, gives feedback, and makes a judgment about the project.

Not every team gets their project approved, just like in real life. In many cases, the grassroots team is sent back to do more research or refine the proposal. Not having completely shed their old cultures, teams often deal with the subjects with which they are most familiar—policies and procedures, communication, enforcement—but that does not go far enough. Clarifying a lock out/tag out policy, putting up signs, and giving the policy teeth is a good first step; but until management demonstrates its willingness to stop the line and workers are convinced that their safety takes precedence over speed—all the policies and signs in the world will not prevent injuries.

Graduation

At this particular three-day course, attendance was nearly perfect and everyone worked diligently. When you are a key member of a small team, you have got to pull your weight. Simon and Liss presided over a graduation ceremony at which everyone received (and deserved) a diploma. Not everyone will become a transformational change leader, but everyone who attended went back to their places of business with a clear understanding of culture, how it relates to safety and how to change it for the better. They even discovered they are now part of a new community of culture change agents who hail from a collection of top companies across the entire nation and are equally eager to stay in touch and continue to learn from each other. Now if they can only convince their fellow team members back at home that they weren't goofing off for the week.

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