

A Cultural Change:



Safety, A Cultural Change

Abstract of Presentation by Ray McKinney

Historically, safety management has been implemented when the injury risk factor has exceeded society's threshold of acceptance. This change did not occur instantaneously. Actually, it was a slow process of evolution that was affected by public opinion, worker dissatisfaction, compensation cost, unacceptable productivity levels, and a deterioration of trust between the work force and management.

These events climaxed in the United States during the late 1960's, and the demand for change was voiced. Disasters, single fatalities, and employee injuries reached a level of worker and public unacceptance; thus, the most encompassing safety legislation in history, the 1969 Mine Safety and Health Act was brought to life. This Act initiated the preliminary change in our safety culture. As the transition began, we found ourselves in a position similar to our nation's pioneers of the railroad industry in the Nineteenth Century. The federal mine safety regulations were "our" railroad tracks for the journey to improvement, but we still needed tools for the installation process and a competent work force to clear the right-of-ways and install the rails. Our initial response to this dilemma was to conduct a mass hiring to obtain a work force to enforce the new regulations. This was an obvious first step for us, but it placed us in the mode of piloting safety management without the resource history and experience to achieve the maximum benefit of our new safety regulations.

Over the years, our learning curve in safety management has revealed that reductions in fatalities and accidents can only be accomplished when rigid enforcement of the regulations is complemented with: a well trained professional and credible inspection work force, an overall understanding of the regulatory process and expected results, a balanced training program for miners and industry personnel, and an ongoing dialogue with all factions of the mining industry. These have been key issues for our Agency, and we have aggressively addressed each one as a priority.

MSHA devotes significant resources to the development of our inspectorate. The Agency is firmly committed to maintaining our inspection force as one of the best trained safety organization entities in the world. Our commitment was evinced by the construction of the National Mine Health & Safety Academy in Beckley, West Virginia. Each inspector is placed into a comprehensive training program that incorporates a balance between hands-on training and approximately 640 hours of classroom training. The classes address all facets of the daily mining environment such as ventilation, roof control, electricity, accident investigations, industrial hygiene, health, etc. In addition to these core classes, there is a general focus on communication ability and safety salesmanship. Instruction in aspects of hazard identification, onsite inspections, and general safety awareness is accomplished by mentors during the hands-on training.

Without exception, MSHA considers communication with industry personnel to be of utmost importance to the success of a functional safety management program.

Although safety at a mine is primarily the responsibility of the mine operator, we always strive to be a viable partner, particularly when the need relates to providing information and upgrading training. Our philosophy over the years has been to involve the miners and management in the initial regulatory process by soliciting comments, holding public hearings, and conducting seminars on new regulations. This fosters a degree of ownership by the customers, therefore reducing surprises and animosity often inherent to implementation of new regulations. We also focus our efforts toward proactive seminars, problem solving groups, and shared data collection for mine evaluations. The aforementioned activities permit us to express our safety concerns in various arenas and to involve all interested parties in the business of improving mine safety. The use of laptop computers in the field has been an asset to the accident analysis program by giving us a much broader ability to manage information and identify problems in a timely manner.

MSHA is deeply rooted in the belief that a well-trained worker is the key to a safe working environment. A properly managed safety program involves hazard identification by everyone exposed to the mine environment. We provide support in this area by utilizing the framework of our training regulations to examine specific training needs and to become intimately involved in ensuring operator and miner participation. We attempt to set the example in this area by committing our Education and Training group to aid operators in establishing functional programs and providing informational support, as well as onsite assistance.

As an Agency and industry, we have moved beyond the thought that safety is habit or practice and determined that it must be a value. Obviously, this means that everyone involved must place the same significance on safety as they do on production. As stated in Sec. 2(a) of The Federal Mine Safety and Health Act of 1977, "the first priority and concern of all in the coal or other mining industry must be the health and safety of its most precious resource-the miner." This concept has led us into a cultural movement in safety which we believe has accounted for the 82% reduction in fatalities during the past 25 years(260 in 1970 versus 47 in 1995) and the approximate 169% increase in production (609,803,256 tons in 1970 versus 1,030,279,875 tons in 1995).