[COMPLIANCE TIPS]

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Keys to sustainable performance

In 2007 the Center for Chemical Process Safety (CCPS) published its next generation process safety management (PSM) system called Risk Based Process Safety (RBPS). The RBPS framework has 20 elements grouped into four accident prevention pillars:

1. Committing to process safety.
2. Understanding hazards and risk.
3. Managing risk.
4. Learning from experience.

A new element, formally recognized in the RBPS framework, is contained in the "committing to process safety" pillar — "Process Safety Competence." Developing initial process safety competence at all levels of an organization and sustaining it throughout the organization's lifetime is an imposing challenge for a variety of reasons.

This organizational competence requires that we first identify the necessary individual competencies. Defining these across a large organization can be a daunting task. Once defined, these competencies (often presented as a "competency matrix") are an important input for training program design and also provide an anchor point for managing one aspect of organizational change.

Initial training programs that blend a variety of effective delivery methods can be used to develop competence in work force members and can also be used as continuing training to maintain competency at the desired levels over time.

Of course, with time all things change and that change may demand re-evaluation of necessary competencies and training programs. Besides the obvious internal sources of learning, many external sources and associations should also be used to grow the organization's knowledge and competency base.

Developing and maintaining process safety competency encompasses three interrelated actions: continuously improve knowledge and competency, ensure that appropriate information is available to people who need it and consistently apply what has been learned.

The learning aspect includes efforts to develop, discover or otherwise enhance knowledge. These efforts range from narrowly defined tasks that develop new information based on a specific request to wide ranging efforts to maintain and advance the knowledge base of the entire organization or even a sector of the chemical industry. The learning aspect can also include structured processes to retain people-based knowledge like individual development plans and succession planning.

Noted Harvard professor, David Garvin, identifies the following six characteristics of a learning organization:

• Recognize and accept differences, and support discussion and evaluation of divergent opinions and data.

• Provide timely feedback and flexibility in the means used to conduct work activities. Evaluate current methods if a new, and potentially better, approach is introduced.

• Stimulate new ideas to promote a step change in risk understanding and operational performance. Small incremental changes can play a significant role in developing and maintaining competency and managing risk, but the incremental approach should not preclude new ways of thinking and acting.

• Maintain an external focus. Ideas or approaches developed outside the organization are not automatically discounted, but are evaluated to determine if they fit the facility's objectives. Similarly, when studying previous incidents within the industry, a learning organization understands that "it can happen here" and takes steps to improve safety.

• Tolerate errors and mistakes, but learn from them. Obviously, mistakes that can have catastrophic consequences are not tolerable, but failure to encourage innovation, analyze errors and promote further learning stifles improvement. Do not demand perfection.

• Establish and periodically update the learning plan to help focus efforts to increase competence and revalidate the perceived benefits and expected costs of learning activities.

While nearly all companies profess to be learning organizations that aspire to a high degree of competency, those that are successful in this pursuit intentionally foster learning by establishing objectives and plans to achieve those objectives. A true learning organization promotes activities that help create, acquire, interpret, transfer and retain knowledge. Learning organizations are adept at translating new knowledge into new ways of behaving, and managing the learning process so that it is focused and purposeful. True success comes when an organization can translate these learning activities into sustainable culture change.

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