

Process safety culture: Why is it so important?

By: WALT L. FRANK, P.E.
Senior Consultant
Organizational Performance Assurance Center
ABS Consulting

Since the introduction of the OSHA process safety management (PSM) standard (29 CFR 1910.119) in 1992, companies have committed considerable effort and expense to developing PSM programs. Unfortunately, serious incidents and audits all too frequently point to gaps in PSM implementation. In the new book, "Guidelines for Risk Based Process Safety," the Center for Chemical Process Safety (CCPS) asserts that even an ostensibly complete PSM program will not effectively produce the intended results if the organizational culture does not fully value, support and establish an obligation for PSM excellence.

The CCPS's book (written by ABS Consulting) addresses a dilemma increasingly faced by the chemical process industries — the need to respond to expectations by management, regulators and society for continuous improvement in process safety results while managing the competitive pressures that can impact resources for implementing and maintaining PSM systems. The guidelines

show how a strong safety culture can help enhance PSM effectiveness and, in turn, help address this dilemma. The CCPS's perspective on the importance of safety culture has prompted it to include safety culture as an element in its new PSM model.

In the book ABS Consulting describes 12 features essential to implementing a safety culture element in a PSM system. Below are four features that recent events have shown to be significant:

- Establish process safety as a core value. The importance of process safety to the individual, the organization and the community should be understood by all in the organization. Each individual should have an awareness of his/her responsibilities with respect to their process safety performance. The culture should reflect a strong individual and group intolerance for violations of norms of process safety performance. There should be a balanced perspective on the importance of both traditional worker safety and process safety performance as unique but parallel goals of the organization.

- Provide strong leadership. Visible, active and consistent support for process safety programs and objectives needs to exist at all

levels of management. Managers should feel comfortable with their roles and responsibilities to nurture process safety culture. It is imperative that managers are committed to doing what is right and that they "walk the walk" — that is, they share their values through their communications, actions, priorities and provision of resources. The concept of "process safety as a line responsibility" should cascade down from leadership to all levels of the organization.

- Establish and enforce high standards of performance. High standards of process safety performance need to be established, communicated and reinforced for both organizations and individuals. While the organization must understand that human errors can be prompted by management system failures, there should be zero tolerance for willful violations of process safety standards, rules or procedures. The organization should be alert to the potential for performance degrading over time and should establish and monitor key performance indicators.

- Maintain a sense of vulnerability. A high awareness of process hazards and their potential consequences must exist within the organization, and there should be a constant

vigilance for indications of system weaknesses that might allow such hazards to manifest themselves. The organization should actively seek to avoid the complacency that can result from past safety successes.

Regardless of whether you are trying to establish a new process safety management system, revamp an existing underperforming system or improve a solid system to achieve higher performance, it is the actions or inactions of individuals working within the system that can ultimately be the limiting performance factor. Therein lies the importance of a healthy process safety culture.

It has been suggested that, "safety culture is how we behave when no one is watching." If we can have the confidence that *all individuals at every level* in our organization share an imperative for sound process safety performance and can be trusted to behave in a fashion supportive of such performance (regardless of whether they are being watched), then our task of effective PSM implementation becomes a good deal more straightforward and more likely to succeed.

For more information, contact Walt Frank at wfrank@absconsulting.com or by phone at (302) 239-0496. □

Improving Business Performance

ABS Consulting promotes a safety culture within a process safety management program by offering services and training to develop and implement a strong safety culture to help enhance the organization's process safety management effectiveness.

ABS Consulting can help your organization implement a safety culture by performing analyses, implementing management systems, conducting audits and investigations, developing performance measures, creating policy-level or operational-level procedures, and providing software tools and training courses.

Creating and Sustaining a Sound Safety Culture

July 23 - 24, 2007 • Houston, Texas

In this course, you will learn to:

- Assess current plant culture
- Determine changes that need to be made
- Establish an environment to foster change
- Measure the effect of culture change

Sign Up TODAY!

To register and for more course information, call us at 1-800-769-1199 or visit us online at www.absconsulting.com/training.

ABS Consulting
AN ABS GROUP COMPANY

www.absconsulting.com • Ph: 281-673-2945

DANGER
ELECTRICITY OVERHEAD
MAXIMUM
SAFE CLEARANCE
4.8 METRES

DANGER
EXPLOSIVE AREA
NO ENTRY
NO POSITIVE

For more information, e-mail us at:
energy@absconsulting.com

Please visit us at the TCC/ACIT EH&S Seminar, booth no. 203