

Case Study

Rethinking Safety:

Changing safety and culture at a chemical manufacturer

In operation since 1968, this 530-employee chemical manufacturing facility in Louisiana, had very good safety performance by industry standards. However, the facility's management knew it could do better. An improvement trend generated by an earlier behavior-based safety system had stalled and the site was now producing a steady stream of injuries with increasing severity. So when a fatality occurred in 2001 and a corporate mandate required all sites to reduce total injury rate (TIR) to 0.5 by 2004, the site's leaders took it as a challenge to not only meet the new standards but to go one better: they wanted to rethink the way they approached safety as a company.

A Focus on Culture

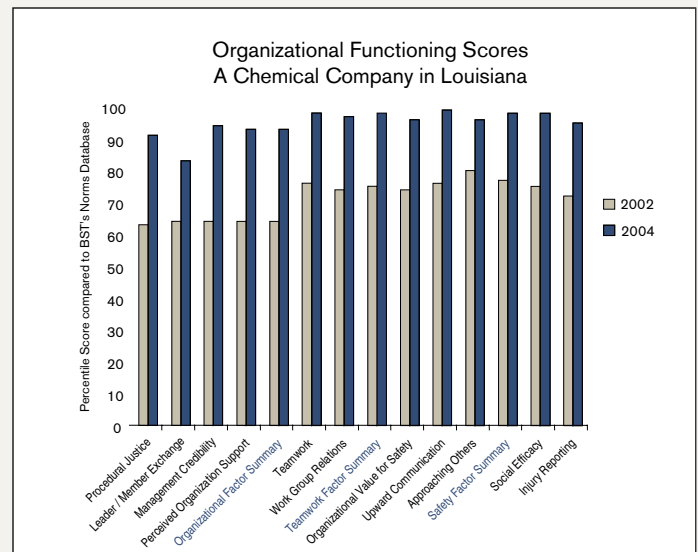
The management team knew it wanted a world-class health, safety, and environmental (HSE) system of the caliber that benefited every performance area. Yet their experience showed them that this would be a challenge. The behavior-based safety effort had delivered great results as long as it remained a priority. However, its success and a low incident rate combined to isolate it from other production activities, and from the site's management itself, and caused it to lay fallow. The management team knew that creating the desired level of functioning meant changing the whole culture of the site so that safety became included integrally in everyday activities. Additionally, whatever solution they adapted would have to provide not just a vision but the tools and skills for everyone to perform his or her role. Leaders needed the tools to drive the culture toward world class safety and performance, and technicians needed to be able to develop work practices that supported that new culture.

With this vision in mind, site leadership asked BST to develop a comprehensive solution that encompassed all of these goals. BST recommended starting by defining a high-performing culture in practical terms. In June 2002, BST used a detailed organizational functioning diagnostic instrument, to measure nine cultural factors that predict downstream outcomes. Doing this was expected to identify areas in the culture that would benefit from leadership attention. Since scores on this instrument are compared to a norms database of other companies, the site was able to see how it ranked in its aspiration to achieve world-class performance.

Findings showed that the site enjoyed strong work team functioning and communication, indicating that technicians were able to work well together, and were likely to speak up about performance issues among themselves. The findings also showed that there were significant opportunities in developing the credibility of management, the perception of the organization's support, and the organization's value for safety. While the site's scores in these areas were ranked fairly high compared to other organizations, they were not high enough to meet the client's vision of a world-class HSE site.

The Real Solution

BST worked with the client to revive the site's employee-driven safety effort, only this time with added skills and technology and leadership support that would capitalize on the site's strong technician base. In addition,



because of the increasing severity of the few injuries the site did have, BST consultants helped the employees running the process to expand the scope of their activities to include identifying exposures in whatever situations people were working in regardless of whether the hazard had previously resulted in an injury. To support the new safety process, BST also worked with the client's team leaders, giving them training and coaching in leadership best practices and applied behavior analysis tools to help them work more effectively with their reports.

While the employee-driven safety effort provided much-needed gains in identifying and removing exposures to injury, site leaders knew that it would not by itself provide the cultural improvement the site was looking for. Consequently, the client asked BST to help them team the employee-driven effort with the site's 16 leaders. After a diagnostic assessment of individual leader characteristics, BST consultants conducted an alignment workshop that helped the leader's understand their role in improving the safety culture and defined performance targets for the group, particularly in how to develop stronger performance in management credibility, organizational support, and communicated value for safety. Afterwards, each leader participated in a rigorous series of one-on-one coaching sessions and were provided the benefit of observation and feedback on their interaction with those who reported to them and their progress toward their coaching targets.

Outcomes

Within six months of re-launching the employee-driven safety process, employees were capturing critical information about exposures that made it possible for site management to improve the systems and equipment employees worked with. In addition, leaders were already using new behaviors that supported the new culture they envisioned. At the same time, the incident rate began to drop. Within 12 months, the company's baseline incident rate had dropped to under 0.5, besting the corporate mandate by a year. In 2004, the site re-administered the same cultural diagnostic survey it had used before beginning the safety intervention and found a dramatic difference in results. Instead of scores ranging in the 70th percentiles, the organization now scored in the 90th percentiles. With particularly strong improvements shown in management and organizational factor scores, the client was making significant progress toward being a world-class HSE performer.

