

Combatting the “Blame, Shame and Train” Strategy

Accidents occur on the construction job site. Even non-fatal injuries are a red flag to those charged with creating both a strong culture and climate of safety that something is systemically wrong.

While there has been acknowledgment that safety must be recognized as a top priority with measurable outcomes, companies choosing to apply a “blame, shame and train” approach after an accident occurs, often experience a considerable improvement in recordable accident frequency and severity rates. However, there can be backlash after the initial “call to action.” When safety measurements begin to approach near zero, a transference occurs which often leads to the undermining of the systemic “safety first” construct.

The recognition of this quantifiable occurrence is not enough, as awareness is only the first step in the multi-faceted approach to keeping the worker safe. As a result, the construction industry must be willing to ask essential questions, including:

- 1) What destabilized the process?
- 2) What needs to be done to readjust so safety remains a priority?
- 3) What checks and balances need to be executed to ensure that safety is in fact first?

From Shaming to Blaming and Beyond

In order to address these questions and in turn responsibly measure and manage culture and climate of safety, the construction industry (<http://www.sa-estrin.com/>) must be prepared to accept the existence of a widespread, unproductive and fundamentally dangerous safety management approach still adopted by many companies, that of blaming the worker.

When the construction industry, specifically Owners, Construction Managers, General Contractors and Prime Contractors, choose to incorrectly place the majority of the blame on the worker rather than acknowledging and/or comprehending that a construction accident is rarely caused by a single management failure or error, safety is greatly destabilized.

Frequently, when an accident occurs and a worker(s) is injured, the company immediately looks to find someone to blame, the worker. Blaming is only the first step, as next is the shaming, characteristically publicly and branded as the root cause of the event.

Once management has tried to solve the problem by “blaming”, the next line of defense is addressing the incident through “training” by focusing on teaching “what not to do”, determined by the flawed conclusion that the entire accident was the fault of a worker. This “blame to train” construct is key in understanding both the “how” and “why” safety checks and balances begin to systemically erode. Those

in charge of safety are often hesitant to admit that their safety management strategy was the cause and as a result, they implement a “blame, shame and train” method to solve the problem.

While many publicly condemn such practices, it becomes apparent when accidents occur, as accidents emphasize an ineffective safety stratagem; one that often was initiated from an incorrect assumption that if an investment of time and money was allocated in creating a Job Hazard Analysis along with policies and protocols regarding safe work practices, it becomes impossible for the system to fail. As a result, the only other conclusion becomes that of human error.

This is a dangerous thought process. While worker contribution is certainly something that must be explored and combined into the entirety of the safety narrative to understand how an accident occurred; it cannot be the only variable in the calculation, as safety does not happen in a vacuum.

Why is this Strategy so Prevalent?

Those in charge of safety often apply this strategy because it appears to address the problem that led to the accident, (blame) by showing metrics, (train) which “prove” safety priorities have been successfully restored, when in fact it is only temporary.

While it may appear to decrease workers from engaging in high-risk behaviors, the “blame, shame and train” strategy has not proven to empirically make the workplace any safer. In fact, it can generate greater challenges as the initial decrease in the number of incidents often leads to complacency on the part of management, resulting in a “safety plateau”.

This unproductive means of addressing job site safety only emphasizes the need for a new approach; a systemic modification away from the inclination to blame the worker as the singular reason for the accident, as there is an inherent difference between a workplace that is safe and a workplace where no one gets injured, as a truly safe job site is free from recognized hazards, whereas a workplace where no one gets hurt, is just a lucky one.

How can this Obstacle be Overcome?

By not focusing on reactive strategies, more proactive approaches for improving the systemic nature of safety management systems can be adopted. This can be accomplished by:

- Creating a clear understanding of the difference between a safe job site that is free from recognized hazards versus one that is playing the odds and hoping that no one will get hurt.
- Establishing a strong and measurable culture of safety that can be operationalized in the form of a strong climate of safety.
- Implementing a proactive, scalable and adaptable safety management program, focusing on the systemic nature of safety in the form of root cause analysis in an effort to identify the multiplicity of errors and omissions that failed, rather than “who is to blame”.

Workers make mistakes. However, human error must be seen as a means by which to evaluate if safety checks and balances are systemically robust enough to maintain operations. Before looking to blame the

worker, those charged with the accountability of construction job site safety must be prepared to explore the entirety of the problem, which includes an acknowledgment that for any accident to occur, there is nearly always a failure in safety management systems.

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