200 Years of ASSE

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Consider the huge changes that have occurred in our global societies over the last 100 years–we live in a very different world than that of our forefathers. In 1905 my grandfather immigrated to the United States. As I look at his Ellis Island documents and the other materials that are available, I am amazed. The documentation available to us from the pictures taken over the years adds to this "future shock" realization. With an amazing 100-year ongoing Society leadership focus on helping to deliver a safer world, I am especially heartened by the American Society of Safety Engineers' ever-improving part of this migration.   Our Society's focus on safety has been truly valuable to all of us in the United States, and to the global community as well. It is very difficult for an organization to survive for 10 decades, let alone improve in each of them, and I am proud to be a part of ASSE because they have excelled in every way.

We have all seen the pictures of various crews from 100, 50 and even 20 years ago. The visible safety equipment improvement is truly phenomenal! Regulations, procedures and training that go with these visual examples are similarly impressive. I have often considered my father, who was an hourly welder, and his various job-related arm, back, optical and auditory injuries. These kinds of injuries were simply considered to be a part of the day-to-day job in his era. I am truly thankful for all the positives the Society has helped to accomplish in getting advancements over time, including conditions, protective equipment and various technology improvements. I think of the research and efforts done in this regard by safety pioneers such as H.W. Heinrich, Frank Bird and Dan Petersen. What huge contributions they, and others, helped to advance.

This brings to mind some other significant milestones in the 100-year progress toward a zero-incident safety culture:

- Large companies (like DuPont and Dow) that have invested major funds in developing work standards, processes and engineered solutions to workplace conditions that protect employees. These were done before the governments used this private sector work as the templates for government regulations

- Behavior-Based Safety concepts that began engaging employees across, as well as up and down, the organization in improving awareness and resolving observable workplace issues
- Computer database advances that allow sorting and focus on repetition and leading/lagging indicators

Numerous ASSE members' safety contributions go far beyond the hardware, procedural and legal paradigm shifts. I remember less than 20 years ago that the safety manager job was often given to someone who didn't have a clearly defined place in an organization. If a company couldn't figure out where a person fit, yet wished to continue that person's employment, the position of safety officer seemed like a suitable dead-end job. Once, after a fatality, I took over corporate safety for a large company. The man who was in this job at the time of the fatality had but two responsibilities; maintain an injury data base (which truly helped our improvement teams' focus efforts) and carry a sound-level meter into plants as he negotiated OSHA penalty assessments (which was no help at all).

The work of ASSE has made huge value-added paradigm shifts for the safety officer/manager. As I work with organizations that are dedicated to not injuring people, I now find true safety professionals worldwide. I have had the opportunity to meet and work with these passionate local safety staff in Canada, Mexico, Europe, Saudi Arabia, Australia and South Africa. In every case the people who were not educated in the United States understood the realities of safety software, programs, regulations, PPE, procedures and other safety issues. Wherever I've been these safety pros have developed many useful programs. ASSE has been an integral part of this safety excellence movement, and even more so now as the Society is actively starting chapters across our globe. Global companies that bring in their cultures of excellence are helping partners in the spread of needed improvements in production-related areas as well as in safety.

The people of ASSE have been a true force in improving safety worldwide. As a result, my father's day-to-day unsafe world and the nonprofessional safety manager are continuing to fade away. Safety is indeed becoming a value and not just another "bolt on" priority addressed after production, quality and customer service accountabilities. However, the hourly and salaried employees still need jobs. They often believe that doing whatever it takes to get production out will preserve the job that they and their families so desperately need. This type of hidden culture continues to contribute to unwanted events like injuries, environmental disasters and catastrophic production mistakes.

With this in mind, we must ask where the future of safety improvements lies. From my perspective, we are still not good enough. Our technology and approaches to delivering a zero-injury safety culture still need significant improvements that go well beyond our current state of focus on regulations, observations and "posters on the wall that do nothing positive at all." Add to this the frequent malaise of safety committees that accomplish little or nothing as they chase a never-ending process called the Accident Reaction Cycle and it becomes clear: we need to break out of this all too common culture that delivers a mediocre (that in the past years would have been considered excellent) safety performance plateau. In start-up safety cultures the foundational focus on conditions, PPE and procedures is truly a necessity. However, many organizations that have moved beyond the basics of regulations and observation programs struggle with their plateau performance, and are nowhere near our Society's zero-incident performance goal.

A safety culture that only focuses on the basics-- the "blocking and tackling" of safety--is not a day-in and day-out zero-incident performer. Our regulatory bodies seem to remain focused on more regulations and heavier fines. It is easy to audit what you see: the procedures, the logs, the conditions; especially when the audits are mostly reactive to some event that caused the authorities to be called in for such a review. And who gets such a review? Typically it is the larger companies that have deep enough pockets to pay fines and can make a big splash in the press. What about the thousands of small organizations that hire millions of people but have few, if any, professional resources? My personal experience with this kind of group is that they seem to be all but forgotten, yet their personnel suffer just as much when injured.

I don't know if our government regulatory reality will ever get beyond the politically expedient approach of more regulations, more auditors and more fines. I hope so. However, their focus is not the total responsibility of our ASSE membership. Over the next 100 years it is my belief that if we are to assist in getting closer to the goal of a zero-incident safety culture, our Society and its members must push beyond a simplistic focus on "glasses and gloves" that seems so entrenched in what we are called on to do by government and corporate entities. We need to develop and live a culture of Authentic Involvement that includes regulations and observations, but also goes beyond these safety basics.

Culture, what we do day-in and day-out, doesn't have the error-proof focus that is found in production, quality and customer service excellence initiatives. The training, the metrics, the teamwork, the relentless focus on achieving zero errors is not generally a part of the safety efforts. It is as if 40+ years of government regulations and the ubiquitous observation programs have presented a nearly insurmountable barrier to expanding our safety technologies. Our training is all about regulations and observations with some psychology thrown in for good measure. We don't seem to pay much attention to the significant, applicable production improvement technologies and lessons that are available.

Excellent tools and the teachings do exist. Dan Petersen's work with Charles Bailey from the University of Minnesota, Duluth on safety culture diagnostics is exceptional, as are Petersen's Safety Accountabilities approaches. The quality revolution material from Deming, Juran, Crosby and Toyota (among others) sets the stage for successfully engaging our total workforce in developing a safety culture that has no tolerance for injuries. No, this isn't a punitive approach; it is complete engagement in eliminating all the obstacles--be they conditions or a more personal sloppy culture, which exists in both the hourly and salaried ranks across our planet. As study after study shows, it is personal actions that lead to most injuries; and those improper personal actions occur at both hourly and salaried levels and can be found throughout an organization's hierarchy. Error causation is not just an hourly phenomenon.

Production, quality and customer service organizations have been forced to address this same cultural sloppiness in their efforts to eradicate all errors in their work cultures. The training they have developed to do so is directly applicable to our safety leadership, be they hourly or salaried. It is a short step from an excellence in quality culture to an excellence in safety culture. And they have done so without the forced government regulations that do provide an impetus, but unfortunately also bring along the stumbling blocks mentioned above.

A model for safety culture improvement I have seen work in many organizations includes the following:

- Interactively train executives in safety culture models that make sense to them and work in safety

- Use a validated safety culture diagnostic
- Interactively train hourly supervision and middle management in the same meaningful safety culture models so they have similar points of reference
- Interactively train volunteer, hourly and salaried personnel in continuous improvement techniques and tools that work in improving safety cultures
- Engage these volunteers in developing a Zero Incident safety culture by improving what the diagnostics indicate is needed
- Fix the broken safety committee model that has myriads of people wasting untold millions of hours with little or no value-added results
- Develop safety accountabilities throughout the organization and at all levels for each of these team safety improvement initiatives
- Have the improvement teams develop a system that Defines, Trains, Measures, Recognizes and Audits the Safety Accountabilities, processes, systems and procedures that come out of their team solutions
- Pilot these team solutions, adjust as necessary, and then roll them across the whole organization
- Develop modern communications approaches that go beyond lagging indicators, safety posters, "trash and trinkets" and the like. These passé tools continually fail to motivate or engage our workforces at any and all levels of the organizations
- Develop the safety manager into an effective leader who works well with the operation's culture personnel
- Repeat the process, just as is done in production, quality and customer service excellence initiatives

Does this sound something like the quality initiative approaches of Plan, Do, Check, Act? Maybe there is a bit of Define, Measure, Analyze, Improve, Control (DMAIC) there as well. Indeed, my words are meant to be a reapplication of what has worked so well in developing zero-error cultures worldwide.

New tools are a start, but there is more. This kind of approach will demand developmental improvements of the safety professionals as well. Over the years I have watched many safety professionals struggle to get their messages across. In addition to this basic communication issue, another has also been common; an inability to be promoted beyond a position that just evaluates and enforces government safety regulations. The safety pros I've worked with have been good people, yet they nearly always have difficulty gaining the confidence or trust of the upper-level managers who have their own definition of credibility, which goes beyond the classic safety regulations and observation paradigms.

The successful, respected safety pro will need to fit in with a production counterpart model that engages personnel from all levels of the organization:

- With individualized (safety) accountabilities
- That focus on activities
- That eliminate the possibility of errors (injuries)

It is not about counting things you don't want to have happen; like injuries or items on observation check sheets. Rather it is about counting and reinforcing the excellent completion of activities that eliminate the

possibility of injuries (and other errors) by people throughout the organization. And this requires both some flexibility and engagement of the total workforce in the safety culture excellence processes that need to become a part of the new safety culture.

The relentless pursuit of zero!   This is the key to success for many modern global business leaders. The Continuous Improvement tools of six sigma, lean and kaizen deliver engagement of personnel throughout the organization in a culture of success. The future state safety pro will need to rise above the maddening crowd, engage in a process similar to this excellent production culture approach in order to deliver a zero-incident safety culture "every day in every way."   I would suggest to you that it is about safety pros taking a leadership involvement in using these common business competency tools and in so doing developing a safety culture that goes "beyond glasses and gloves." It works for your production counterparts; it can work for you as well.

I believe these ideas and concepts are what our ASSE organization will need to energetically engage in for the next 100 years if we are to break through the injury culture plateau that is so evident in our best of the best, which just aren't quite good enough.