Safety Stand Downs: Turning a Waste of Time into a Value Added Event

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Safety Stand Downs in Military and Civilian Working Culture

Whether as a part of a Department of Defense organization, a private entity or a family, both off and on-the-job safety issues should cause everyone to pay attention to both injuries and close calls with an intensity that prevents serious events from occurring. Organizational and personal safety stand downs are vital to the wellbeing of workers, their fellow associates and their family members' future lives.

The following is an anecdote shared by a follower of my safety culture blog:

"I have heard that when you are taught something it is your duty to teach it to another. In the Marines, our entire wing would take one day off from flying each quarter to conduct what is called a safety stand down. Or, as this naïve start of my career lieutenant would say: safety stand around. (Really, a whole day without flying?) During these stand downs, every pilot, crew chief and 1st mech. would talk through close calls in the hopes that others would learn and thereby avoid similar dangerous events.

The talks were not limited to aviation. One crusty old staff sergeant from the admin section of the squadron recalled hanging off the gutters of his house when the ladder slipped out from under him. He had overextended himself while painting. A former locomotive engineer civilian graphically described the dangers of railroad crossings."

Well, of course my first thought on these events was along the lines of, "That will never happen to me; I am not THAT stupid," or "Wow, I could never be THAT unlucky". These were my exact thoughts as a colonel described his close call with a compressor stall at night over an area with no place to land his CH-46 helicopter. The actions he took were 'innovative.' However, his quick thinking not only saved the aircraft, but also his life and those of his crew.

Nearly a year later, I was the one who was flying at night over wooded mountainous terrain and started hearing a series of loud 'pops.' Right then I knew the plane was going to be coming out of the sky, safely or not. Was I ever glad I had paid attention during that 'stand around.' If not, I wouldn't be writing this account of my own close call. At the next safety stand down, my attitude

changed to, 'Maybe others will be alive as a result of hearing about my close call.' That day, I learned teachers affect eternity; they can never tell where their influence stops."

How to Improve Safety Stand Downs

This man's story and a recent conversation with a senior level officer of a large company that has been struggling with safety performance changed my perspective on safety stand downs. The officer decided it was time for a safety stand down, not because of a trigger safety event, but because he was disturbed by the behavioral trends driving his team's safety culture. He explained to me that the safety culture of the group for which he has responsibility was just not good enough for his principles and values. Our deep discussion resulted in this POP (Purpose, Outcomes, Process) statement, which was delivered soon thereafter to the officer's employees:

<u>Purpose:</u>

- Make sure everyone is aware that we are not making adequate progress. Our safety incident reality is not the kind of performance that will keep us from injuring our people.
- Our current safety performance is not good enough for our family of employees who work here. A common thread in the incidents, as I review them, is that we are choosing to take actions that seem expedient over the right/safest way. Our personal inappropriate actions are not deliberate – nor complacent – just not making "no shortcuts" a top priority. We rationalize and take shortcuts that have become our productivity/safety work culture. We are living a disturbing kind of sloppy, situational awareness culture. We all must do what it takes to put an end to this dangerous, everyday reality.
- I must make you aware that you are responsible and accountable for your own safety, both on and off the job.

<u>Outcomes:</u>

- You have heard my concerns.
- You realize that productivity is always second to safety.
- I am very grateful we are submitting near misses that you have been personally involved with. You are facing many of the wrong attributes of our safety reality and responding correctly and positively. We must keep actively addressing and resolving close calls.
- Over the next week, every site will do a safety stand down and every one of our employees will identify at least one safety hazard/action/policy/procedure we have become complacent about and learned to live with.

    I ask each of you to personally commit to resolving these issues. All of our branches will capture these items and post them very noticeably on their walls as an action item matrix. I ask that each of the sites email me its list. In turn, we at corporate will compile a total list – and publish it. I then ask each one of you to discuss the identified issues and commit to addressing and resolving every one as part of improving your safety reality. Injuries are inexcusable. It is not about money. I don't care if it takes longer to do the job. My bottom line desire is that no one gets injured.

I do care that you each take a personal responsibility to live a personal culture of no shortcuts, no complacency, and no injuries on or off the job. I want each of you to earn your safety situational awareness and responsibility 'medal.'

- Each time a member of the senior leadership team visits a site, we will join you in reviewing and auditing your safety issue list. We will next review/audit our corporate list and we will begin asking each of you about these issues and the new ones you have identified and resolved since this stand down. We must wipe out what we know to not be right.

Process:

- I approached the Safety Steering Committee Continuous Improvement (CI) team and advised them of the concerns relative to our rising number of incidents and explained what we are going to do differently. They are now working on this 'elephant in the room.'

- I have begun to engage every employee in the company face-to-face by having a "personal one-on-one stand down" with each. So far, I have talked to almost 200 of our 425 people.

This officer's safety stand down POP, personal follow up and associated individual safety accountabilities are fostering a value added safety stand down culture.

1. What are the unsatisfactory issues, incidents and close calls that lead to the need for a safety stand down?
2. What are you (we) doing differently to eradicate these issues – now and in the future?
3. How are we going to ensure that this is accomplished now and in the future?
4. How are we communicating our commitment and the results that have come from this stand down?

This industrial insert is meant to give an example of a process by which you can improve your safety culture and to explain the importance of developing a robust safety stand down process which matches your culture, has accountabilities and thereby delivers excellent results.

But how does a civilian industrial stand down relate to the military? There is a common theme among military organizations, a push to improve their safety cultures. One of the ways is through these 'close call' sessions, just like the ones my blog follower explained. These sessions should help to reduce the many unfortunate injuries and deaths that are all too common with the dangerous profession they are tasked to execute. Out of necessity and principle, the military community takes the life and death realities of their combat cultures very seriously. Their planning, training and practice is excellent, well thought out and well executed.

But this raises an important question: On the job safety is important, no doubt, but what about the off-the-job military culture? Remember the staff sergeant's mishap with the ladder? His story may not be as exciting as the helicopter pilot's harrowing tale, but the former illustrates an important point: Universally, for all of our service branches, most injuries and deaths occur off duty. I have been frustrated time and again as the "mission is all-important" focus overwhelms any discussions and meaningful actions on a very serious threat to their battle field (mission) viability – what happens in the off-duty hours.

And most industrial organizations do the same thing when it comes to off-the-job safety culture; they only pay attention to work hour safety. There are numerous general '*rules of thumb*' that illuminate our safety culture reality, including some recent National Safety Council (NSC) research data shown below.

- Nine out of 10 deaths and about 70% of the medically consulted injuries suffered by workers in 2010 occurred off the job
- Nearly 14 times the number of deaths occur off the job compared to on the job (13.8 to 1)
- More than twice as many medically consulted injuries occur off the job (2.7 to 1)
- Production time lost due to off the job injuries totaled about 240,000,000 days in 2010, compared with 60,000,000 days lost by workers injured on the job

Workers' on- and off-the-job injuries, United States, 2010

Place	Deaths		Medically consulted injuries	
	Number	Rate	Number	Rate
On and off the job	56,083	0.014	18,300,000	4.4
On the job	3,783	0.003	5,000,000	3.3
Off the job	52,300	0.019	13,300,000	5.0
Motor vehicle	17,500	0.062	1,800,000	6.4
Public non-motor vehicle	8,700	0.020	3,300,000	7.6
Home	26,100	0.013	8,200,000	4.2

Source: National Safety Council estimates. Procedures for allocating time spent on and off the job were revised for the 1990 edition. Rate basis changed to 200,000 hours for the 1998 edition. Death and injury rates are not comparable to rate estimates prior to the 1998 edition. Medically consulted injuries are not comparable to estimates provided in earlier editions that used the definition of disabling injury.

And yet how many organizations have a serious off-the-job safety program? Not many, because, just like the military, we focus on our mission safety culture. And just like the military, when an organization loses one of its people to an off-the-job injury it significantly affects their ability to perform the missions that support their organization's and workers' livelihoods. A serious safety culture dictates you must protect your people at all times.

So, what is your plan for eliminating off-duty injuries? If it is not as well thought out, trained and executed as your prime mission safety culture, you are setting a trap that can be extremely painful for your employees and your organization. Is it time for you and your organization to develop and live a zero-incident off duty safety culture?

In addition to this, how can you include a viable action oriented safety stand down aspect in both your job-related and off-duty safety processes