

Why Compliance Won't Get Us To Zero

Posted: October 19, 2011

By: Kevin Burns - Workplace Safety Expert

In general, compliance means conforming to a rule, such as a specification, policy, standard or law. In other words, freedom of choice and freedom of thought are not required. All that is required is a simple adherence to the rules.

But can we take compliance in safety seriously? Yes, compliance got us to where we are in safety today. Yes, it was necessary to clean up the mess we were in. Yes, we had to give the employees a common standard across all industries so that they could adapt their behaviors equally in all workplaces. So there is no question that compliance was necessary — for a time. The question remains, however, can compliance take us to where safety needs to go? Overwhelmingly, the evidence says no.

Compliance in the workplace is a standard of absolute minimums. It is the line in the sand we cannot cross. It is a bar that has been set so low as to be impossible to go under. In the same way that the construction industry has a building code (a set of standards that a builder must not fall below), and in the same way that governments have instituted minimum-wage requirements (another nice way of saying if I could pay you less I would), compliance was necessary to ensure that workplaces met minimum standards of safety and workers were protected even if it was the employer's choice not to do so.

Can the process that cleaned up our backyard, and got us to our current benchmark, can it be the same process that delivers us to the promised land of Zero? Times are different now. Worker education is different. Workplace processes are different. Worker protection is different, at least in the minimum-standard sort of way. Worker attitudes are for the most part different. And an entire industry has risen up built on a set of absolute minimum standards. Is this really the way we want to carry on — achieving basic minimum standards?

I remember listening to the occasional Earl Nightingale recording on the radio in the early years of my life. That big, deep, basso profundo voice spoke like the voice of God. Mr. Nightingale, as I recall his words, encouraged me to hang out with successful



people if I wanted to achieve success in my own life. If I, according to Nightingale, hung out with slackers and ne'er-do-wells that it was very likely I would become one. But if I were to hang out with successful people then the likelihood was greater that success would show up for me.

That same advice could be applied to an entire industry today. Compliance, for the most part, is the same as hanging out with the D-students: students who are just getting by but flirting with failure if they do just one or two things wrong.

Here is the problem as I see it. Until we start seeing CEOs attending the safety conferences, and not just sending their safety managers, safety will always be an arms-length part of any organization. The people who attend these conferences are the choir of the Church of safety. They already know it's important. It's the decision-makers that need to attend these conferences. It's the people who are in positions of power, who can affect change to the corporate culture of an organization. That's who should be attending these conferences. That's who should be meeting with safety managers. And until the entire team across the top of an organization embraces safety as a viable and necessary part of their organization, safety will always be an arms-length concern.

Corporate America treats safety as the dorky little brother they are forced to bring along when they want to hang out with the cool kids. But safety shouldn't be treated that way. Safety should be permeating the discussions in sales, finance, human resources, marketing, management and every other department. Safety should have an equal seat at the table of all decisions within an organization. We should be having the discussions around safety across all departments of all organizations. But we don't. Safety isn't readily visible, well at least not in the same way as Ireland and the UK. In those countries, you can purchase safety wear, high visibility clothing and some personal protective equipment and department stores – not from hidden specialty stores and industrial catalogues like we have here in North America.

The saying “out of sight, out of mind” really rings true in this regard. If we could readily purchase safety clothing and equipment in the same way we could buy power tools, wouldn't it stand to reason that we might be willing to accept safety more readily? If we could see it everywhere, it would likely be embraced more.

But because of its primarily industrial-focus, (with a few exceptions) safety is aimed squarely at the blue-collar worker who apparently has little capacity to think for himself. It's why we force blue-collar workers to pee into a cup, but turn a blind eye to the white-collar executive who has the two-martini power lunch and then drives back to the office. It's why we send a blue-collar worker home because they wore the wrong PPE yet continue the practice of sending executives off to exotic management retreats and allowing them to make cloudy-headed decisions on the future of the company, while suffering the ill effects of the open bar from the night before.

For the most part, safety takes a top-down philosophy. Those at the top, or at least those with letters behind their name, make the rules, procedures and processes for others to follow. And is it working? Not really. In fact, incident numbers are rising.

Einstein said, “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.” I learned a long time ago that if you keep doing what you’ve always done you’re going to keep getting what you always got. Regardless of whether safety numbers have flatlined or are on the rise, something needs to change. The numbers are not heading in the right direction. That means, what we are doing has been useful in getting us to where we are, but it might be time to upgrade to a new vehicle — something that can get us to where we need to go.

Maybe it’s time we asked our young workers to come up with solutions to stem the rising numbers in their own age category. After all, presupposing that old safety managers can develop strategies that will resonate with younger workers sounds like a recipe for disaster. You can’t develop full buy-in by thrusting rules and regulations upon your people. Making them feel as though you know what’s best for them better than they do creates push-back. Blind compliance fails over time.

Expecting people to blindly follow because of someone’s says-so doesn’t make sense any more — especially as the workplace changes its age. Generation Y doesn’t subscribe to a “because that’s the rule” philosophy. They want to know why (hence the name Gen Y). They don’t have the same propensity for blindly following as those who make the rules so if you want to get your organization to Zero, you had better start including them in the discussions. They have ideas. They have suggestions. Employees will embrace anything that they themselves had a hand in creating.

Without appealing to the hearts and minds of your workers, you create an us-versus-them adversarial relationship that too, will fail over time. Sure we need to have minimums (for those that would try to do less) but the focus shouldn’t be on achieving minimums. We should be shooting for something far beyond minimums. Minimums are for the lazy.

Safety, as we know it, needs a facelift. Top-down may have worked for a while but maybe it’s time for a grassroots-up strategy. Maybe it’s time to begin to think more collaboratively — to get everyone involved — not just a select few who have managed to achieve some sort of certification. Safety is not a club — it’s an attitude.

If you seriously want to achieve Zero, you had better be prepared to give up your titles and your organizational hierarchy. There is no place for any of it in safety. Safety is something that should transcend position, power and place and consider all of your employees as equals. That’s the only way it works in the future. You can’t legislate conformity — which means compliance is on its last legs.

Kevin Burns – Workplace Expert – Management Consultant – Keynote Speaker