

New York State Public Entities Safety Group 497

Safety Agenda

___ Chief, Fire Department
___ Site Administrators
___ Commissioners
___ Human Resources
___ Supt. Bldgs/Grounds
___ Elected Officials

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The Case for Safety Mentors and Storytelling

These are only two of the important insights contained in the report of a research project conducted by NIOSH, *"Tell Me a Story: Why Stories are Essential to Effective Safety Training"*. The project produced seven safety videos using miners to deliver their stories on the dangers inherent in their work, and lessons they had learned to keep themselves safe. At the beginning of the project, however, the researchers took lessons from research on adult learning behaviors; the comments below are taken from that universal knowledge base.

The "case" starts with the realization that adults learn differently than the ways that children learn. Adults are pragmatic in their learning. They will not put energy into learning that does not appear relevant to their lives. Adults need to know why they need to learn something, and they must be ready and motivated to learn. They have to see the training as valuable. ***"Their most memorable learning came from personal experiences, from working within groups of other adult learners, and from mentoring they received from someone they perceived to be both knowledgeable and wise."*** (p.12)

This insight into adult learning is at odds with current safety training, which is all too often the talking-head variety, with the trainer in front of a classroom and the trainees sitting and listening passively. Adults in any working community are likely to be resistant to changes suggested by outside safety "experts". They may change their behavior to comply with

mandated rules when a supervisor is watching, but when monitoring is not taking place, they often revert to their old habits.

Mentors, on the other hand, have a basic level of credibility because of their age and length of experience; they are generally admired and respected, and they can play key roles in training and teaching new employees. They also have stories to tell. A mentor knows what is important, how to do things right, and "how things are done around here," including unsafe acts and omissions.

Mentoring of new employees by older employees takes place on an informal basis in just about every organization. Without direction, however, that mentoring will be in the "this is the way we do things around here" mode, including shortcuts and unsafe acts. Why not assign a respected senior employee the responsibility, and honor, of helping new hires to understand the how's and why's of safety rules along with their experience and stories? Why not find ways for those senior employees to tell stories about their mishaps and near misses at safety meetings? Stories have great potential to influence behavior. They entertain, as well as show what others would do when faced with a certain set of circumstances.

Tell me a Story: Why Stories are Essential to Effective Safety Training. Elaine T. Cullen and Albert H. Fein, August 2005. See NIOSH web site www.cdc.gov/niosh.

Why is Risk Management Important?

Risk is a term that refers to a possible loss or other adverse event that has the potential to interfere with an organization's financial stability or ability to fulfill its mission. In its pure form, the term, "risk" encompasses far more than its customary use in relation to insurance. Risk management is also much more than a "safety program".

Risk management is important to municipalities and fire departments because they can protect their financial stability and their ability to provide a wide variety of services to their constituents by identifying risks and implementing action plans to mitigate those risks. In summary, risk management helps avoid or reduce the impact of risk on organizations.

Risk is inherent in most productive activities, and even the best efforts cannot eliminate all risk. Public sector organizations are exposed to many risks that go beyond the insurable risks of accidental losses due to property damage, auto accidents, liability and workers' compensation. They also risk losses to revenue stream, tax base, bond ratings and actions of other governments, to name just a few.

"Pure" risk management takes a broad view of insurable as well as uninsurable risks that the organization might face. Accepting this broader view of risk management requires the organization to do a better job of identifying and assessing risks, assigning priorities to them, and then developing short and long range plans for mitigating those risks.

"Managing" risk is not just a function of supervisors and managers. There must also be a broad understanding of the organization's

risk exposures and the acceptance of responsibility for preventing and controlling losses throughout the organization.

It is essential to have a person close to the "CEO" to have overall responsibility for risk management, and for that person to have the full fledged support and involvement of the "CEO" in the risk management program. In reality, however, the person charged with organization-wide responsibility for risk management inevitably has many other responsibilities. Risk awareness must be thoroughly integrated into every level of the organization's culture and operations.

A strong risk management program is based on a policy statement made by and backed by the governing board and enthusiastically promoted by the "CEO". The policy defines risk management as a priority for all staff members, and assigns specific responsibilities for anticipating and identifying potential risks. It establishes and empowers a safety committee to utilize broad participation in identifying safety concerns; provides for the correction of unsafe conditions; and safety awareness activities. Perhaps most important, the policy requires the participation of all departments.

Risk management is important because risk is inherent in all activities. Failure to manage risk is dangerous to the health of the organization and its ability to deliver promised services.

*Happy
Holidays!*



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