



Prevention trumps reaction

Monday, 19 April 2010 09:04  Shawn M. Galloway 



(Editor's note: Beginning this month, Canadian Occupational Safety is adding another talent to its roster of columnists. Shawn Galloway, international speaker and professional safety coach, will draw from his experiences to provide readers with valuable insights towards achieving safety culture excellence.)

Recently, America experienced one of its worst mining disasters since the early 1970s. Twenty-nine miners lost their lives in an explosion at a West Virginia mine on April 5, 2010. For days, rescuers attempted to locate four unaccounted-for individuals. Early in the morning of Saturday, on April 10, the final four miners were located. It is believed they perished in, or immediately after, the explosion that claimed the lives of the other twenty-five miners.

I recently made a comment about this tragedy on my [Facebook page](#). A friend, Todd Wilson of Seattle, Wash., responded, "Shawn I think it's time they put locator beacons on the miner — similar to avalanche equipment."

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The first time I went below ground while consulting for a mining client many years ago, I expressed a similar concern. The rationale provided to me was that it was too costly and it wouldn't work at the depths of many mines. I found that these two explanations were widespread, and inaccurate.

I end each episode of my weekly [Safety Culture Excellence podcast](#) with, "In safety, prevention trumps reaction." I believe we live in a modern time of safety advancements and, largely, that is true. However, there are still ineffective common approaches to injury prevention prevalent throughout even the developed world.

Many organizations miss identifying the prevention point and only recognize improvement opportunities following injuries. Certainly, some miner location systems can be quite costly when assessing the upfront, initial investment. But when we compare this to the cost of a lost life, the investment pales in comparison. Sometimes, we must help those in leadership positions realize that the old adage is true, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

Consider both the direct, hard costs (operational, insurance, legal, fines, etc.) and indirect, soft costs (investigation time and resources, lost production, equipment repair, replacement of workers, morale, stress, impact on culture, company reputation, etc.) of reacting to an injury.

When considering the reallocation of funds towards preventing injuries, a safer organization is a more productive organization. While having safety as a true core value is the ethical thing to do, looking at the reality of the global competition also provides a competitive edge.

Todd also stated, "Mining will always be a risky endeavor but we have the technology to change the outcomes in many instances." I couldn't agree more.

We have to appreciate that even now, with all of our advancements in safety science, there is nothing we can do to completely eliminate all of the risks from industrial, occupational environments, or from the world for that matter. However, we shouldn't stop trying.

Consider how far we have come in the recent decades toward decreasing risk exposure. The way we look at safety today is significantly different from how we looked at it 20 years ago. I predict we will have a similar reflection another 20 years in the future.

The great philosopher, Voltaire, once said, "Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good." I believe we should continue to evolve our ability to respond to undesirable events. However, we cannot wait until we are perfect at reacting before we take steps towards prevention. In fact, what looks like the perfect answer today will be antiquated tomorrow. This is why an increasing number of organizations benchmarking with our client companies are encouraged to identify from them "better practices", rather than best practices.

In safety, many of the top performing companies realize that, similarly, best today is common practice tomorrow. To join these ranks, we must remain aggressively proactive and insatiably curious about risk prevention.

I hope the legacy of our collective efforts in safety will ensure our children and grandchildren work in companies where injuries are no longer the impetus for safety improvement, and where, "We should have..." is no longer a part of the safety vernacular.

Shawn M. Galloway is the president of ProAct Safety, an international safety excellence consulting firm. As an author, speaker and expert strategist, he has assisted hundreds of organizations to achieve and sustain excellence in safety, culture and operational performance. Shawn is the host of the weekly podcast series, [Safety Culture Excellence](#). He can be reached at 936-273-8700 or info@ProActSafety.com