



The mindset of safety excellence

There are sites I'm scared to visit — sites where everyone believes they are excellent in safety performance and culture. Our thoughts, the language we use and how they complement or conflict with our behavior will affect our ability to improve safety. When we believe we are excellent in safety, we stop looking to improve. When we say all incidents can be prevented, yet we track nonpreventable vehicle incidents, we create confusion and disbelief in the objectives. We strive for excellence in all we do in safety. The problem develops when we believe we achieved it.

In early 1900s America, the industry estimates for construction fatalities on skyscrapers was one death per floor built. Now, we wouldn't conceive of such evaluations. In many industries, the safety practices as recent as 10 years ago are no longer acceptable. Working with several clients employing meter readers, the long-accepted practice of fence jumping to obtain readings is becoming culturally viewed as unacceptable. Yet, it takes time to change strongly held and long-term reinforced beliefs and

behaviors. Culture change is a transformation and a transformation is an era. Neither is a program or an event.

Some client organizations have adopted the term "Better Practice" to replace "Best Practice." They believe when a best practice is adopted employees will stop looking for a better way and fall into the confirmation bias trap, only favoring information confirming the chosen path is still best. It is easy to fall in love with a methodology and many individuals' careers rest on its continued success, persuading continued investment even when it is no longer yielding value.

When I delivered the keynote to a Cintas Corp. private conference, I learned a lot about the organization and its values. Cintas strives to embody a sense of positive discontent in all individuals and decisions. Author Mark Sanborn notes positive discontent is similar to "better rather than best-practice" thinking:

"Positive discontent is the combination of gratitude and discontent. It doesn't discount or diminish what we've been able to accomplish, but neither does it allow us

to rest on our laurels. Positive discontent allows us to enjoy what we've achieved without the attendant danger of becoming complacent."

Terry Mathis wrote about the challenge of attempting zero injuries and the idealism and realism that surrounds it:

"The most effective safety effort is neither blind to the magnitude of the challenge nor resigned to accept some level of failure. Likewise, the most effective safety effort is always intelligently adapting but never knee-jerk reacting. Where the idealist would fail to adapt and the realist overreact, the effective safety professional continuously analyzes and improves the approach, always looking for the next better way to improve safety. It is possible to dream the impossible dream without tilting at windmills."

Safety excellence is a journey that never ends. We should celebrate our successes when the results improve and have a sense of confidence in their continuance, especially when we know what led to improvement. We should celebrate when we see the culture evolving and posi-

tively shaping the beliefs and behaviors of new members and contractors. We should always remember, however, all risks can never be completely removed from any industrial setting. Moreover, we should remember our employees are most likely to be injured away from work. We will continue to make progress when there is pride in what has been accomplished, yet a healthy sense of vulnerability remains. All within the organization must realize, "Sure we are good, but there will always be a better way."

Shawn M. Galloway is the president and chief operating officer of ProAct Safety and coauthor of two books: "STEPS to Safety Culture Excellence" and the "Hazardous Materials Management Desk Reference, 3rd Edition." As a professional keynote speaker and internationally recognized safety excellence expert, he has helped hundreds of organizations within every major industry achieve and sustain excellence in performance and culture.

For more information, contact Galloway at (936) 273-8700 or info@ProActSafety.com. ●

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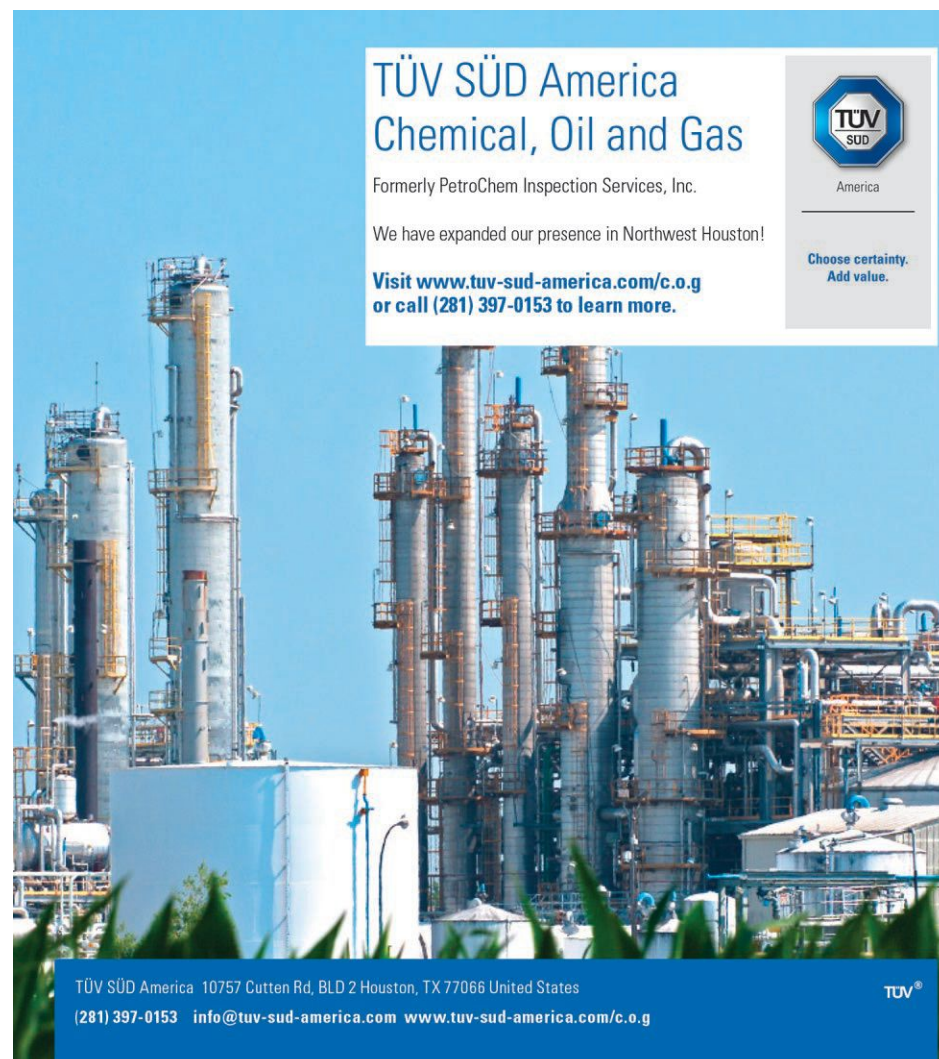
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