

RISK COMMUNICATION IN THE REAL WORLD

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ABSTRACT

As people become more sensitive to health and environmental issues, effective communication of workplace risks becomes more important for both employers and their employees. Risk communication must be given in a clear, simple format that addresses the individual employee's work environment. It must also be provided in a manner that indicates to the employees that the company cares about their safety. Failure to provide this information may result in ineffective communication and reduced company credibility. By using events and issues from the employees every day life, these issues can be effectively managed.

DISCUSSION

Gone are the days when employees did their jobs, asked no questions, and received no answers. Today, employees in ever increasing numbers are questioning the decisions made that may affect their well-being and doubting the credibility of answers received from employers.

The general trend of increasing health and environmental consciousness in America contributes to this safety awareness in the workplace (1,2). The media often heightens this concern with sensationalistic reporting (3). People watching the evening news or reading the daily paper become inundated with messages that greatly exaggerate the risks from chemicals and other potential hazards in the workplace when compared to common, generally accepted risks such as those associated with driving a car.

Some employers address the issues of health and safety through training programs designed to meet the minimum letter of the law. These programs may be presented as if from a scientific journal full of target groups, p factors, linear quadratic relationships and other overly technical terms. The presenters may have neither an understanding nor an appreciation for the individual employee's work environment. This approach leaves the worker with no better understanding of health and safety risks and often results in reducing the credibility of the trainer and the employer.

The two primary goals of any risk communication program must be to keep the risk communication message simple and directed to workers actually or potentially exposed to the risk, and to ensure that every phase of the program demonstrates honesty and conviction. One recommendation for keeping the presentation simple and direct is to take advantage of the popular press. Certain magazines, such as *Science*, *Readers Digest* and *Popular Science* sometimes contain articles that present an open evaluation of health and risk issues. By augmenting a company program with articles from publications that employees are likely to accept as credible, the message will be better received and understood. As an example, the January 1990 article in *Science* magazine regarding asbestos risk (4) and subsequent similar articles have significantly contributed to helping most individuals put the real risks of asbestos into perspective. Even though the results of the *Science* article are debatable, by offering this article to employees and explaining clearly that this is just one side of the debate, employees can be exposed to a side of the issue that suggests that all of the "doom" stories they may have heard from the popular press may not be correct.

A major advantage of the judicious use of articles from the popular press is the increased credibility that it brings to the risk communication program. This credibility is just one aspect of ensuring that each phase of the program demonstrates honesty and conviction. Until employees believe that the company is presenting risk information fully and honestly, the risk communication effort will be largely ineffective.

Some companies attempt to increase credibility through the use of mottos such as "Safety First" or "Safety Always". These mottos may represent great ideals but can be viewed as insincere by workers who are actually exposed to the risks. It is very difficult to convince workers that safety is first when they are made to perform jobs with above average risk, such as working at significant heights, entering confined spaces, or working in areas with measurable carcinogens in the air. To say that safety is first while requiring employees to perform potentially hazardous jobs may leave employees with the thought, "If safety is so important, why am I made to take this risk." This scenario can undermine a basically sound safety program.

An approach that may be much more successful than a one level motto is to develop a realistic integration of mission and risk. Companies do not exist unless they perform a function, whether it be producing a product, defending a country, or cleaning up the environment. By ensuring that all employees understand the company mission and the ways that safety can be used to meet that mission, workers will more likely accept the level of risk associated with the job. This is demonstrated by the successes of employee-owned and operated companies.

An example of clearly identifying a mission and its risks with concern and integrity is General Schwarzkopf's effective leadership during Desert Storm. When General Schwarzkopf spoke, both the mission and the level of risk were clear. It was also apparent that each and every person involved in the war was important to him and that everything possible would be done to reduce the risk. Obviously we are not at war in our companies and our missions and risks are usually less clearly defined. However, we are asking our employees to accept risks, potential injuries, and exposures to potentially life threatening situations. Unless we present our risk communications with the same level of thoroughness, conviction and openness as did General Schwarzkopf, workers will continue to doubt the value risk communications and possibly the credibility of the company.

The few examples used above demonstrate some problems and potential solutions affecting risk communications in

today's workplace. It should be noted that the roots for both the problems and solutions identified above are from the employees' interactions with events in their everyday lives. This was done to demonstrate that to effectively teach risk communications in the real world, events of the real world should be factored into risk communications.

REFERENCES

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