



Proactive Accountability for Safety

By Judy L. Agnew, Ph.D.

When incidents occur in business, there is often a call to find those who are responsible and hold them accountable for their actions. Accountability is essential in safety, but the question is, does accountability always have to include negative consequences? In too many cases, accountability translates into disciplinary action against the frontline worker(s) directly tied to the incident (such as verbal and written warnings,

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– Judy Agnew

suspension, and even termination). If a frontline employee engaged in at-risk behavior that resulted in an incident, you might wonder why discipline is a bad idea. The answer is that incidents are rarely just the result of one employee making a bad choice.

Most incidents are the result of a combination of root causes. While frontline workers are often the ones who engage in the *final* at-risk behavior, typically multiple upstream at-risk behaviors on the part of management, engineers, and executives contribute as well. A simple example is a frontline employee who fails to put on fall protection when working at height and experiences an injury as a result. On the surface it seems reasonable to blame the worker if he has been trained and clear expectations have been set that fall protection must be used. However, a closer analysis reveals that the fall protection is stored a long distance from the work, and management has put pressure on the employee to complete the task within a short amount of time. In such cases, when the blame is assigned only to the person at the point of the incident, it is, quite simply, unjust. Frontline workers often feel they are blamed for incidents when circumstances beyond their control (but within the

control of management) play a part.

A system that seems unjust or unfair leads to the erosion of trust and respect between frontline employees and management. Without trust, excellence in safety is unattainable. Safety excellence requires all employees be engaged in proactive safety efforts. Lack of trust, created through unfair disciplinary action (perceived or real), erodes the willingness of people to be more engaged. In the words of one frontline employee, “Why should we do any more than we have to in safety? No matter what we do, management will still blame us when there is an incident.” Without trust, open and honest discussions about at-risk behavior, near misses, and unsafe conditions will never take place. Without those discussions, risk and exposure cannot be minimized.

In addition to undermining trust, there are other reasons to be cautious with the use of discipline and blame. Research shows that negative consequences (like discipline) have detrimental side effects that often outweigh any positive benefit. Some side effects include fear, lower morale, limited engagement, and suppressed reporting of incidents and near misses. Most importantly, discipline often does not result in safety *improvement*.

The science of behavior makes this clear; discipline and other negative consequences should be minimized in safety. This doesn't mean reduced accountability, but a shift in the type of accountability. Virginia Sharpe, in her studies of medical errors and harm, has made an important discrimination between what she calls “forward-looking accountability” and “backward-looking accountability.”^[i] Backward-looking accountability is about finding blame, finding the individual who made the mistake, and delivering punishment. As noted previously, there are many downsides to such action, and blaming and punishment seldom results in a safer work-



TIPS FOR IMPROVING FORWARD-LOOKING ACCOUNTABILITY IN YOUR ORGANIZATION

- Approach incidents assuming they are failures of management systems, not the failure of an individual.
- Do in-depth analyses of behavioral root causes to understand why at-risk behavior at any level of the organization has occurred.
- Create an action plan to remediate all root causes including changes to management practices, organizational systems, et cetera that may have contributed to at-risk behavior.
- Create an accountability system to ensure action items are completed.
- Build an ongoing process for checking that the root causes remain addressed.

By shifting focus to forward-looking accountability, not only will you create a safer workplace, you will build trust, engagement, and improve your safety culture at the same time.

place. According to Sharpe, forward-looking accountability acknowledges the mistake and any harm it caused but, more importantly, it identifies changes that need to be made, and assigns responsibility for making those changes. The accountability is focused around making changes—changing organizational systems, modifying management practices, addressing hazards, and building safe habits—that will prevent a recurrence, not on punishing those who made the mistake. This kind of accountability will positively contribute to building a culture of safety.

To read more about accountability and the use of discipline in safety, read:

SAFE BY ACCIDENT?
Take the Luck out of Safety
Leadership Practices that Build a Sustainable Safety Culture



¹Sharpe, V. A. (2003). Promoting patient safety: An ethical basis for policy deliberation. *Hastings Center Report Special Supplement*, 33(5), S1 – S20.

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[About the Author]

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Judy Agnew is a recognized thought leader in the field of behavior based safety, safety leadership, safety culture and performance management. As senior vice president of safety solutions, Judy partners with clients to create behavior-based interventions that use positive, practical approaches grounded in the science of behavior and engineered to ensure long-term sustainability. Judy has presented at major safety conferences, as well as other key corporate events. She is frequently interviewed for, and has been published in, national and trade publications. Judy is the author of three highly regarded safety books, *Removing Obstacles to Safety* (with Gail Snyder), *Safe by Accident? Take the Luck out of Safety* (with Aubrey Daniels) and, *A Supervisor's Guide to [Safety] Leadership*.

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