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ONE APPROACH TO SAFETY

By CHARLES B. CHILTON
Mgr., Industrial Safety Engineering, General Electric Co.,
Philadelphia, PA

Like most aerospace firms, we have suffered considerable attrition due to Federal budgetary restrictions and the scaling down of the space effort. We now have a division population of something over 3,000 employees in more than a dozen facilities ranging from about 2,000 at Divison Headquarters to a handful in the Iranian desert.

Our core business is basically the manufacture of re-entry systems for space vehicles. Our other products involve the application of aerospace technology to today's environmental and sociological problems. Some of our products are industrialized (or modular) housing, oil-water separators, automatic air quality monitors, and cybernetic automated material handling systems. A very large portion of our work is in the applied research and development area. For every product we come up with, literally hundreds of others have been developed, tested, evaluated, and discarded, put on the back burner, or spun off to other GE Divisions.

Thus, I think you can appreciate the variety of operations and materials involved — radioactive materials, toxic agents, lasers, explosives, plasma arc welding, electrolytic metal deposition, and numerous others. Consider also the fact that many tests or operations are of a first time ever or one time only type—the hazards are usually not fully known or the economics are such that full-scale hazard abatement measures that would be used in a production operation may not be practical. Add to this mix a potful of PhD's and scientists who either know all the answers and resist safety department efforts to "disrupt the program" or else suspect the answers and therefore won't tell anybody anything. Many of our employees have multiple disciplines and move from one job or program to another as requirements dictate.

When I came to RESD more than five years ago, my impression was that safety operations were on pretty much of a "free-lance" basis—play it by ear and hope—except in cases where statutory requirements existed (as in use of radioactive materials) or where past experience (usually bad) had shown the need for active safety involvement. Because of the high quality of our employees, this approach worked pretty well. We've always done well from a loss prevention standpoint; our frequency and severity rates have always been below those of the Aerospace industry as reported by the National Safety Council.

The "greening" of OSHA changed this somewhat, of course, if only because this tremendous package of standards now became law with requirements which had previously only been recommendations. Although OSHA speaks largely to routine, recurring situations, and, as noted earlier, many of our problems are unique, I have found, in general, the Act to be very beneficial. A lot of the haggling is done away with: "I can't help how you feel or what you think, it's the law."

But really, our prime impetus for improvement came, not from OSHA, but from the realization that our statistics had reached a plateau (as had national statistics) and frequency and severity rates were starting to increase. Costs of workmen's compensation were going up and the long-term prospects in this area were—and are—for more of the same, in spades. So once again, the "bottom line" did it. Loss control is shown to be not a frill or only a humanitarian measure but a contributory factor in holding down the expense of doing business. As an example of control of expenses, one of our facilities had automatic sprinkler protection with old-type heads installed on a 1-2-3 schedule. Increased industrial building in

the vicinity of this facility had downgraded the water supply to the booster pump to the point that we anticipated an insurance carrier recommendation for a fire pump and ground storage reservoir at an estimated cost of \$750,000. As an alternative, we calculated the effectiveness and water demand of 212° modern spray heads on a 2-3-5 schedule and were able to upgrade our protection at a fraction of what the cost would have been if we had waited until we were locked into complying with insurance recommendations.

I suppose there's nothing really new in anything I've said. The one thing in our program that is different from many which I have seen over the years is that we don't really subscribe to the old cliché that "the key to the safety program is the line supervisor." Oh, sure, he's the guy on the firing line and it's his workers who get injured and he's the guy with the most direct influence on how the job gets done. But the same is true regarding quality, production, affirmative action, and just about everything else that goes on. That's asking an awful lot of someone who doesn't set policy, who may not have a full overview of company goals, and who doesn't have much control over budget allocations and spending priorities. No matter how safety conscious the supervisor is, if he perceives that the top boss wants production—or whatever—more than he wants safety, you can make book on the fact that the emphasis will not be on safety. At least, not until a rash of losses occurs, and then the pendulum will swing the other way for as long as it takes for the attention-getting factor of injuries or fires to taper off.

It is this perception of top managerial priorities that counts. When both work-force and middle management are convinced that loss prevention is on a par

with quality and production in the priorities of the big boss, you are two-thirds of the way there. And this is where I think RESD has a leg up on many other firms. This managerial commitment to loss control is responsible for a great deal of whatever safety accomplishments we have made. Our people know that, from our vice-president on down, the chain of command expects a good safety performance, demands good safety performance and recognizes good safety performance. It's a pleasure to work in this type of atmosphere—by no means carte blanche, but when an improvement can be substantiated from a safety standpoint, it's forthcoming. In fact, my staff and I must guard against those who try to justify a pet project on the grounds of safety simply because they know that a safety department endorsement speeds approval and completion dramatically.

As a measure of the effectiveness of what I like to call "total management involvement," last year we worked more than 7½ million manhours with four disabling injuries for a frequency rate of 0.53 and a severity rate of 5.82. So far this year, we have had two lost-timers, along with an injury-free period of more than 4½ million manhours. Based on last year's record, we were selected for the Grand Safety Award presented by the Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce and the Philadelphia Chapter, ASSE, to the firm in the 17-county metropolitan Philadelphia area adjudged to have had the most outstanding safety performance. While protocol will militate against the attainment of the award for a second consecutive year, our objective, from the top down, is to continue to engineer and to educate in such a manner as to minimize personal injury and facility and product damage.

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