

Accidents — is “zero” possible?

By Don Ritz

Like many people, I once believed that a certain number of “accidents” are inevitable in the workplace, and I thought it impossible to go more than one or two million hours without a safety incident.

In 1996, that belief was ‘challenged when I learned a company called S&B Engineering and Constructors had received a safety award for going an astounding 17 million hours without a lost-time incident!

Wondering how this was possible, I contacted the company. They invited me to Houston to discuss their achievement and to visit one of their sites. I was truly amazed when I walked on that site. No one even had to tell me that safety was first and foremost. You could tell by the appearance, the caring, the interactions and communication that safety was firmly engrained in the culture there. The next day, we travelled to Houston for a meeting with (I expected) their head of safety. When we walked into the conference room, there were seven people around the table — the entire executive team! Not only did they greet us, they spent six hours with us explaining their approach. We also learned that their incident investigation team for every incident was their executive team. Clearly, their actions spoke louder than any words about their commitment to safety.

This experience opened my eyes. I now believe the goal of zero incidents is indeed possible, and that committed leadership is the key driver for achieving it.

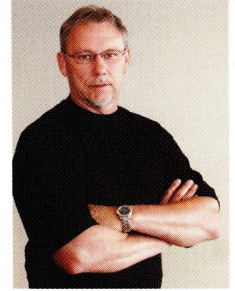
Unfortunately, some people still contend that the special risks inherent in mining, especially in developing countries, make a certain level of injuries or even deaths inevitable, but I absolutely cannot accept this. There are risks in every industry, but we need to assess them, eliminate or mitigate them. If you accept that injuries and fatalities are inevitable, you will no doubt be proven right because your actions will reflect that low standard.

To achieve a zero state, we, as managers in organizations, need to take it seriously enough to make changes in ourselves first. Ask yourself, “If everyone in my organization behaved exactly as I do, how safe would my organization be? Do I really walk the talk?”

It’s our behaviour that tells people what we really believe, not our words. Unless we move from lip service about safety to actually demonstrating safety behaviours ourselves, zero will never be possible. Jim Clemmers, the noted author on leadership, contends managers must lead by example through “up close and personal” involved leadership to make it part of the culture (the way we really do things around here) and make lasting change.

Safety leadership has to become deeply personal. We cannot expect others to change if we are not prepared to change and model the right behaviours ourselves, whether on or off the job. Sometimes we must have the courage to do what is right — confronting people’s attitudes and organizational hierarchies — regardless of the consequences to ourselves.

To understand the impact of safety



Don Ritz, vice-president, Safety and Health,
Barrick Gold Corporation

failures, I have talked with families about how their lives were affected. One of these people is Marjorie Scott, whose son, Keith, was killed in an industrial incident a number of years ago. “Keith’s life is like a rock landing in water,” she told us. “He went down, hit the bottom and never came up. Then a rippling effect occurred. The ripples went out and touched the shores. Those who were closest felt them the most!”

When you understand the devastation caused by the failure to establish safe conditions on our work sites, and when you feel the personal pain of safety incidents at an emotional level, how can you not be personally committed to ensuring zero incidents?

In recent years, I have visited numerous world-class safety successes. Their success is directly attributable to three things: personally committed leadership, a belief system that asserts a state of “zero incidents” is achievable, and a well disciplined approach to risk management at the field level. These organizations clearly communicate the vision of zero incidents. Moreover, the leaders demonstrate their commitment through their own behaviour on and off the job, so employees know it is authentic and not just lip service. The leaders are visible proponents of safety — people hear and see their leaders living safe practices everyday.

Yes, zero is possible. It’s up to each of us to show the leadership needed to get there.

CMJ



Site Safety Takes Courage