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What Would Ralph Waldo Emerson Say About Workers' Comp Costs?

Twenty years ago I thought I stepped into the twilight zone. We were conducting research into how to prevent workplace strain/sprains, particularly back injuries. We were told by several companies in the U.S., Canada and Australia that despite years of trying, they were in the main, unsuccessful. Costs of back and shoulder injuries and then carpal tunnel syndrome-type injuries continued to soar.

We were told that employees wouldn't "listen" or buy-in to safety or injury prevention programs. We witnessed management being reduced to almost bribing employees with donuts and pizza to attend safety meetings.

Oddly, to us as outsiders, companies seemed more interested in preventing pain and life-altering injuries to employees than the employees were! HR and Safety professionals were generally frustrated by having their attempts to HELP being rejected by their employees.



How to get employees to *listen* and embrace corporate initiatives was a critical question to have answered in order to significantly lower workers' comp costs.

This mindset that back and shoulder injuries were "unpreventable" was subsequently irresponsibly reinforced by a *woefully* designed study published by the New England Journal of Medicine. It claimed that "back schools" didn't work to prevent injuries. [NOTE: At the time, F.I.T. had trained 20,000 flight attendants for a major airline on how to reduce musculoskeletal disorders and according to their published reports, back and neck injuries dropped by 63%].

We got a chance to speak to one of the medical doctors who conducted the study and quickly deduced why the "study" produced no results. I didn't ask what kind of donuts and pizza were offered, but if one were looking for a curriculum that was guaranteed to *not* reduce work-related back injuries, this was it. The study's designers didn't have a clue about how to influence employees' behavior to prevent workplace sprain/strains. This ill-fated study just added to the misconception that employees were incapable of being trained to prevent musculoskeletal disorders.

But what if it were possible to "get into the heads" of employees, to get them to change their physical behavior to reduce back injuries, to increase employee morale and to help reinforce a positive working culture? What would it mean to profits, employee good will, and to the overall quality of life for those who would otherwise be victims of these painful injuries? What would it do to restore the morale of Operations Managers, Safety, HR professionals and Risk Managers who are responsible for lowering workers' comp related costs?

In our early research, we knew that young 12-year-old gymnasts all over the globe were being taught how to do back-flips on 4" wide balance beams. Yet, paradoxically, corporate America with huge resources couldn't teach men and women to lift a simple 20 pound box; or dig a ditch; or transfer a patient; or load a truck; or set up a computer workstation; or even help their employees to know how to lift their children correctly.

F.I.T.'s research and development had to solve the age-old dilemma of how to "reach" the employee. A successful curriculum would only be valuable if employees would listen, accept and incorporate our Backsafe® principles into their daily routines. Did it prevent injuries (and sustain) or not was the only acceptable gauge to our research.

Fortunately, 3 major break-throughs in the field of workplace injury prevention were discovered and subsequently validated over the course of training 1 million employees.

One of these discoveries transcends injury prevention to affect all employee-management relations and morale. It is an underlying factor that is hardwired into every one of us. It constitutes the basis of effective human communications. It has to do with trust and how truth begets trust.

Why aren't your employees listening? Why are they sometimes distrustful of management when you are only trying to help them?

When we fundamentally trust someone we freely accept communication from them. Conversely, when we don't, our own internal version of the Berlin Wall is erected.

What does this have to do with workers' comp?

The cost of back injuries can be crippling to any organization's bottom line. The goal of any organization and thus management is to be profitable. Expensive claims are antipathetic to that goal. Thus, all managers are tasked to stop back and other costly injuries.

Do you know that for every goal you have ever made, you had an underlying purpose? I had a goal to lose 10 pounds for a high school reunion. My *purpose* that drove that goal was merely to look better. The purpose is different than the goal itself.

Every injury prevention training program that we evaluated during our early research had cutting costs as the goal--and rightly so. This is good so far! But, the problem that we discovered was that the underlying purpose was also to cut costs! Your employees DO listen! They perceive the truth very well. And the truth is the purpose was almost always to save money!

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "What you do speaks so loudly, I can't hear what you say."

In order to attain the goal to reduce injuries and costs you must have the correct purpose, too. Helping your employees to stay healthy on and off the job is F.I.T.'s purpose. This is a decent and "correct" purpose that employees embrace.

Your employees will perceive your underlying purpose. If it is the same as your goal: to save money, you will never achieve a good buy-in. If you care about your employees then train with that purpose! They will hear it loud and clear.

Not only will injuries go down (our battle-tested Backsafe and Sittingsafe programs prove that) but you will be delighted with how quickly morale can change.

In summary, barriers go up when it is perceived injury prevention initiatives are done for the company's benefit. Differentiate your purpose from the ultimate goal of saving money. Saving money is the right goal but wrong purpose. Train with purpose that benefits your employees and the ubiquitous barriers disappear. To paraphrase a Teddy Roosevelt quote: No one gives a damn what you know until they know you give a damn!

The removal of the employee/management barrier is F.I.T.'s first step of reducing sprain/strains.

In our next newsletters we will discuss the other 2 key breakthroughs that help to successfully increase production, morale and to stop expensive ergonomic sprain/strain injuries.

And the return on investment is much better than an investment in donuts!

Prevent tomorrow's injuries today!™

Dennis Downing, President
Future Industrial Technologies

Check out our blog at <http://www.backsafe.wordpress.com>. Any injury prevention/safety-type topics you'd like to see covered there? Please let us know. We love suggestions and feedback.

We look forward to helping you to "Prevent Tomorrow's Injuries Today," right now!

We're TWITTERing! Keep current on the latest in injury prevention by following us. Find "backsafe" at www.twitter.com/backsafe! Find us on Facebook too!

This article may be reprinted in its entirety provided that the following resource is left intact:

Dennis Downing is the founder and President of Future Industrial Technologies, Inc., a nationwide Industrial Injury Prevention Training Company. It specializes in improving conditions at work and in life by utilizing the proprietary injury prevention programs, BACKSAFE® and SITTINGSAFE®, that have proven to be highly successful at reducing workers comp costs within companies of all sizes and descriptions.

Future Industrial Technologies, Inc.
4930 Cervato Way
Santa Barbara, CA 93111
Call Toll Free: 1 (800) 775-2225
Tel: (805) 967-2485
Fax: (805) 967-2487
Email: info@backsafe.com
<http://www.backsafe.com>

