

Dear National STEPS Network,

January 19, 2017

Tomorrow will mark another interesting milestone in our history. We the people have spoken, and there will be a new, very unconventional, businessman as President of the United States of America. I pray that no matter our personal party affiliation or beliefs, we can all honor our great country's election process and give the man and his team a chance to do their best.

I am writing this month about the importance of leadership and how it applies to worker safety and health in the oil patch. Things are looking up as we see the industry once again climbing slowly out of hibernation. The question is how can we do it safely, and how much influence do managers and leaders have?

Abraham Lincoln said "the best way to predict the future is to make it". We have gotten very good at predicting the likely outcome of wells we are drilling, and the engineers are always finding ways to improve the odds of success. With that said how can we as managers and safety and health professionals predict likely outcomes and prevent incidents? We have to push the envelope, and think outside the box and work together to *eliminate* and *control* hazards and *protect* people to *make a great future*.

We all know that the science applied in oil and natural gas exploration is incredibly advanced. We have some of the most talented, most well educated and forward thinking engineers, geologists and geophysicists in the world, always pushing the envelope and thinking outside of the box. They have been so successful that our country will soon not only be energy independent, but exporting our energy products to other countries. However, with all signs pointing toward resurgence, we must be cautious. History has shown a significant spike in serious injuries and fatalities when the industry adds new workers and brings equipment out of the pastures. We have to work harder than ever to be vigilant about the hazards inherent in our work to ensure equipment is properly inspected, seen and unseen hazards are identified and controlled, and that employees are trained and competent to do the work. We must continue to look for new ways to apply science, such as advanced incident data and engineering technology to safety and health in our industry.

I have been volunteering with OSHA as a Voluntary Protection Programs (VPP) auditor for almost ten years. I not only see how safety and health programs are developed, applied and evolve within our company, but with those companies applying for or renewing VPP. I have seen companies fail, and I have seen companies excel. Without great leadership, the program eventually fails. The last two evaluations I have participated in, both divisions of large global companies, are two of the very best examples of how positive leaders can influence safety and health programs.

At one time, both companies' safety and health programs suffered from high recordable rates, and morale was as low as the managers. Like most of you, I've worked with leaders who not only didn't understand the benefits of a positive safety culture, but seemed to thrive on breaking people down. One manager I worked for in the 1980's went so far as to tell the previously well-performing seismic crew at a morning safety meeting, of all places that they were a dime a dozen and that he might just replace all of them tomorrow. Workers were quickly reduced to silent, compliant drones, doing what they had to do to get through the day, fearing making a mistake and subsequently driving reporting underground. Serious incidents that couldn't be hidden increased and efficiency and profits fell. Sometimes we have no choice but to work in that type of environment, but we still have to try to be a positive influence as much as possible. Fortunately, most good owners and executives see through this.

The turning point for each of the two VPP sites was when a new plant manager with a positive attitude arrived who understood that change was needed. By showing the workers they cared, making safety and health a priority, creating a team atmosphere and giving the team space to excel, morale would improve and production and efficiency would follow. The previously struggling sites soon had the best safety record and also became stars of efficiency and profitability.

One of the sites hung “We are our brother’s keeper” banners throughout the plant. What a great message! Just to get a perspective of what can be achieved, this 2200 acre chemical plant with hundreds of workers, including a large percentage of contract workers on a turnaround, with high pressure and dangerous, flammable chemicals, achieved zero recordable injuries for over a year. There is, of course much more to the story, but all those workers I asked agreed that the positive, caring attitude from leadership made the difference.

There is no substitute for a leader’s humility or boot leather. One of our new leaders at BP puts it this way: Safety is a core value system. Our job as HSE professionals is to preserve value by ensuring we help identify and mitigate risk, and create value by identifying opportunities for the business.

I agree. We are called to value others as we want to be valued. To see this through, the plant managers I mentioned rolled up their sleeves and went to work, asked questions, identified issues and needs and began *responding*, not *reacting* to problems. Workers at these facilities felt they were part of something bigger than themselves, and that their work had purpose. Abraham Maslow explained in a paper written in 1943 that human beings have basic psychological needs such as the need to feel safe and secure, a feeling of belonging and acceptance, and a level of self-esteem. The best managers and companies understand this basic need, provide for it, and subsequently reap the many benefits.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maslow's_hierarchy_of_needs

I mentioned those positive examples because we have to be vigilant. To continue to improve, we need positive leaders. We have several examples of what positive attitudes have done for our industry segment. Since it was rolled out in 2010, SafeLandUSA has had well over 950,000 students and will be over a million by the end of this year. I wish I had a dollar for every time we were told that it wouldn’t work in this industry. We had the same predictions about the STEPS Network, OSHA 5810 and the Field Leadership courses, but they are all successful.

We have thought outside the box and done things that no one thought was possible, and I believe we are saving lives. Our hazard alerts for tank gauging, hot work, and others in the pipeline, and the work with OSHA and NIOSH on respirable silica are some of the other examples of how we are making a difference. Thanks to our friends with the NIOSH NORA Council, we now have the Fatalities in Oil and Gas database, unique to our industry. All of these initiatives and more were created when a group of caring, informed, positive individuals were allowed time away and/or took the time to do something profoundly meaningful. We are making our entire industry segment safer, and make it so that more of the hard working men and women of our industry can go back home safely to their families, just as we want to.

We have pockets of absolute excellence within our industry, and we know that ours can be the safest, most productive, most efficient industry of all industries, but to accomplish it, we need to continue to work together. Written programs are absolutely necessary, but as Dan Peterson said ““Paper doesn’t save people, people save people”. The future is up to us. Please share your ideas and lets work together to make 2017 the safest comeback in our history. Get involved, stay involved. One last (paraphrased) quote from John Wesley - Do all you can, for as many as you can, as often as you can, and in as many ways as you can. This is an industry that can. We have proven it time and again, because of who we are as individuals that together, we can! Sorry if that sounds like a political slogan, but it’s true.

Thanks for all you do,

Rick L. Ingram,

National STEPS Network Chairperson