

Out of the Dark

by HARVEY B. LERMACK

How much does your organization spend annually, in human and financial terms, on personal injuries, insurance, environmental, property loss and damage, fines and penalties? How does this affect productivity, morale and the attainment of your organizational objectives? How much improvement could you enjoy if every member of the work force were properly trained to identify, prevent and manage risks in their workplace?

Traditional safety, environmental and health training programs often do not provide the results your organization requires. You should have an overall strategy to change the culture, with training properly designed and delivered according to that strategy. Otherwise, you are not enjoying the maximum benefit from your investment, and are probably wasting a significant amount of time and money. ➤

Shedding New Light
on Risk Management
Training

As risk managers, we are responsible for identifying the most significant threats to our work force. We must also make sure that people know how to prevent accidents or manage them properly when they do occur. The stakes are high—potential injuries to our employees, damage to our customers' products and businesses, negative impact on our communities, and costs to our company and shareholders.

As a major transportation company, Conrail has implemented an innovative approach to risk management training, covering virtually the entire work force. As a result, we have substantially reduced our accidents, injuries and cost of risk.

Conrail is a class 1 freight railroad that employs a large, decentralized work force. Employees frequently work alone or in very small groups, with little direct supervision and a great deal of self-direction. Everything they do can have a dramatic impact on safety, environmental quality and our products and services. So, it is vital that they understand the full weight of their decisions.

As with many railroads and other companies, Conrail traditionally had a rules-driven approach to regulatory training. Training materials were developed and delivered by subject matter experts, in response to the rules of the Federal Railway Administration, Environmental Protection Agency, Occupational Safety and Health Administration, and others in the alphabet soup of regulatory agencies. The training did not always address the most significant needs of our employees, and did not leverage available time and resources. In fact, we often followed what I call the three R's method of training:

- Rules-driven
- Regulatory
- Reactive

In 1994, we determined that a significant change in approach was required to improve our safety performance. Facing similar issues in many different areas, the company brought those groups together into a new risk management department, reporting directly to the executive in charge of

3 Training Steps to Improved Safety and Risk Performance

- Awareness — identify, assess and control on-the-job risk
- Occupational — target preventive training to specific job groups
- Behavioral — involve everyone in risk management to change behaviors

operations. In this way, we were able to take a holistic approach to risk management, and prioritize and address the most significant issues with the optimal allocation of resources. The new department eventually included safety, environmental, health, damage prevention, hazardous materials management, police, industrial hygiene, claims and litigation, and insurance.

We embarked on a wide range of programs and processes to improve our performance, and to ensure that all the decisions made by Conrail employees were risk-adjusted. Top management became heavily involved. We developed new incentives for people at every level. We measured our performance and provided continuous feedback and reinforcement for our employees. Most significantly, we improved our communications and training processes.

In revising our approach, we drew on all our skills and resources to develop a training curriculum that would attain our objectives and improve performance. The resulting three-step process is described below.

A New Approach

To leverage our limited resources, we enlisted the help of subject matter experts, client departments and training department specialists. We formed teams to develop and deliver training to each key department in the railroad.

Members of the development teams attended course design training together, regardless of their experience. The teams then shared their various perspectives—the client departments described the key risks their people

face; the subject matter experts explained the regulatory requirements that address those risks; and the training experts talked about how to adapt effective adult learning principles. With this foundation, the teams set out to design and develop effective training techniques.

In each department and every division, we identified and recruited opinion leaders with the aptitude and attitude to serve as volunteer trainers. These included over two hundred and fifty line workers (such as engineers and conductors), supervisors, safety committee members and managers. Every trainer received extensive content and platform skills training that emphasized on-the-job awareness, occupational training and behavioral safety.

Awareness

Each member of the work force learned how to identify, assess and manage risks at their workplace in one- or two-day training programs. Using adult learning techniques, we created scenarios directly related to their daily work, videos, overheads and case studies. The small training teams then worked together to draw upon their experience to identify and assess the key risks they could face on the job. The remainder of each session was spent discussing how to prevent and manage these risks.

This accelerated learning helps employees create a framework that builds on their previous experiences and training. The training need not be expensive—just relevant to the work. It has certainly helped our employees to better understand their

work environment and the impact they can have on safety.

Occupational Training

The training development teams also worked together to pinpoint the required regulatory and preventive training. They analyzed the key risk issues, the relevant regulatory training requirements and our prevention priorities. They reviewed our current training, looking for overlaps, gaps and redundancies. They then developed a matrix of training needs that focused on the key risks of the client departments. Finally, they came up with delivery plans to provide maximum coverage, leverage available resources and minimize the time required of the trainees.

Behavior Management

Once the training is complete, it is important to ensure that the new skills are actually transferred back to the

job. At Conrail, we use behavioral safety. In a nutshell, we have everyone in the company involved in identifying key behaviors, observing the employees practicing them, and providing feedback and positive reinforcement. In that way, we are able to measure the effectiveness of our training efforts at the workplace.

What You Can Do


You can quickly assess whether you can improve your organization's performance with a similar approach. Here are some basic questions to get you started.

1. Do all your employees understand the basic concepts of risk management, e.g., how to identify, prevent and manage risks? Do they feel empowered to assess their own work site, and to address the appropriate issues to prevent accidents from occurring?
2. Does your regulatory training target the people who actually need it?

Is someone responsible for ensuring that there are no gaps or overlaps? Do you leverage the resources and training time to their best use?

3. Who conducts the training? Is it done in-house or is it outsourced? Are complete records and course evaluations maintained, and are materials revised as necessary?

4. Is your training appropriate for adults? Is it a data dump, or do people really participate and achieve long-term learning? Are your instructors qualified, and does the training result in actual behavior change on the job?

By implementing an integrated risk management training program, you can reduce injuries, incidents and expenses. 

The training approach described in this article won the 1997 Award for Outstanding Performer in Training from Lakewood Publications.

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