

Paying the Price

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A workplace fatality no one will forget

In early 1997 our business unit was a buzz of activity. Four years of strategic marketing were beginning to pay dividends. Only the year before, our business had been purchased and incorporated into one of the world's largest coating and industrial gas manufacturers, and the influx of much needed capital was a welcome sight to the employees who had struggled through the lean

years of a fledgling business. Finally, we would have the tools to enable the business to thrive.

Even though we had anticipated it for years, when the new business arrived we found ourselves ill-prepared. We didn't have the personnel to sustain the growth we were experiencing. Nevertheless, we were living our collective dream of making the business successful. Employees poured their lives into the effort. We had arrived. Our gross sales-to-employee ratio had reached Microsoft levels. Our earnings before income tax were the marvel of the accountants at headquarters. We were awarded a Zero/Zero plaque, the highest annual award given by corporate, for a perfect safety record.

Every day there were new employee names to learn. Although safety awareness had been an important part of the selection process, new faces have a way of making even the most experienced safety manager nervous. The general manager shared this concern, and immediately made it mandatory for all employees - administrative, managerial, and production alike - to attend monthly safety meetings. All supervisors and department managers also included safety in their weekly meetings. Experienced employees were instructed to take a mentor role and watch over the new employees.

Black Friday

Friday, April 24, 1998, is a day that will forever live in my mind. At 9 a.m. I was standing in the corridor outside spray booth number one with the senior coatings engineer. We were watching the technician prepare to start the new High Velocity Air Fuel system that had been acquired and mandated by our division headquarters. It appeared that the product was not going to make it to market as scheduled under the aggressive plan. There had been a constant battle between the experienced technicians of our business unit

and division headquarters concerning quality and safety issues with the product. As the technician started the unit and ramped up to operating parameters, I could hear the engineer say through the loud hissing sound of the system, "This thing is too loud, too powerful, and too dangerous to put on the market. Someone is going to get killed!"

As he walked down the hallway toward his office I could hear my name being paged over the intercom. A telephone call was waiting for me. The call was from a colleague at headquarters. Normally we shared a jovial relationship, but this time his voice was very serious. Something troubling had happened.

"Do you have all of your safety records up to date?" he asked.

"Yes, of course," I said. "Why?"

"There has been an accident, and one of your employees is . . . injured."

Pictures of my morning plant tour raced through my mind. I had made it a practice to go around the plant early in the morning to see the employees.

"Can't be. Everyone is here, or accounted for," I said.

"Where is your service manager?"

There was a long pause. Then the dull thud of reality hit me. He was talking about Dave Pickett. Dave had been living in the fast lane for well over a year now. Not only was he trying to manage the department but also, because we were short of field service technicians, he was making many of the service trips himself. Earlier in the week we had attended a flurry of meetings together. I had lunch with him when the conversation turned to his upcoming trip.

He was tired and not looking forward to the rigid schedule that he would have to maintain as he flew to England, then Norway, then Sweden, and then possibly over to India before he would return to the office. He had more than 20 years experience in our industry and was known for his dedication to customers and his strict attention to safety practices. For the ten years he was with our business unit, he had performed his job without incident.

"Tell the general manager to call us as soon as he gets back into his office, and don't breathe a word of this until an announcement is made," I was told.

The blame game

I did as instructed. I knew that serious incidents or fatalities were not overlooked at the corporate level. The rest of the morning was a scurry of front office activity. Closed-door meetings and long faces with serious expressions were the rule of the day. Although I did not know the extent of any injuries, the somberness of the upper managers told me that things were not good.

The general manager called a plant-wide meeting in the conference room at 2:30 that afternoon.

"I have some tragic news to report," he started saying as the room quickly fell into a whispered hush.

"There has been a terrible accident involving one of our gas consoles (at a customer's location) in England. A hydrogen leak was ignited while the unit was being serviced. Four people were seriously injured . . . and Dave Pickett was killed."

Some employees ran from the room with their hands covering their mouths. Others fought back tears, and still others sat stone-faced in disbelief.

The general manager told us to expect an influx of visitors during the next week. Corporate and division headquarters were sending in a team of "experts" to evaluate our facility. Even though the fatality had not actually happened at our site, they demanded a full safety, quality, and engineering audit. Their attitudes seemed almost offensive. They had little sympathy for the fact that we had just lost a very good friend. It was obvious that some of them had not come to evaluate, but to implicate and vilify. Someone would be held accountable.

The audits and reviews lasted well over a week. Although they found little for which we could be held accountable, they did, of course, find things we could improve. Their final summation: we ran a safe facility, but we had not been properly assimilated into the "corporate culture" when our business unit was first purchased. I thought that might be the end of it.

A week later the very popular vice president and the director of sales for our division mysteriously "decided to retire." The division director of new product design was released. Our own general manager was reassigned as production manager. We were no longer the corporate darlings.

False security

For the next 12 months things seemed to be returning to a sense of normalcy. Several equipment lines were recalled and new safety features retrofitted in others. Even though the measures were costly and considered

unnecessary by some, it signaled the industry that we were taking a serious look at the design elements of our equipment. All of us knew that these changes had nothing to do with the cause of Dave's death, but we sold the idea to our industry well. Our sales took a slight dip immediately following the accident, but sprang right back after a few short months to once again surpass our sales projections.

Great news in September of 1999! Our division headquarters announced it had just purchased our immediate competitor. We were about to move from the number three position in our industry to number two simply through osmosis.

Over the next few months many of our managers were invited to visit the newly acquired facility. They returned with stories of a lack of productivity, poor housekeeping, and above all, a disregard for the most basic safety standards. All of those who visited seemed sure that we could easily assimilate their facility into ours.

Thursday. 9:30 a.m., January 13, 2000. Another plant-wide meeting was called. The news was swift and emphatically delivered. Our plant would be shut down and incorporated into the newly acquired facility. July 1, 2000, would be our last day of productivity, and our doors would close forever on August 31.

All of us knew that the corporation had a long memory. In the end not one employee who was with our business unit at the time of Dave's death elected to transfer.

We see each other occasionally in the shopping malls and restaurants around town. There is always time to take a moment to reminisce. There is always time to say a silent prayer for Dave Pickett.

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