

**OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH  
MANAGEMENT SYSTEM**

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**Principles of Prevention: Lessons Learned**

I once gave a speech entitled "How Do You Know Its Not Working...Maybe it's not Plugged In" during a management retreat. In the weeks leading up to the retreat (after a several months of implementing a new safety and health management system) executives had been expressing uncertainty of the effectiveness of our new system; managers and supervisors were complaining about cost/benefit and diminishing returns; while I was convinced that success only lacked commitment. However, during the ensuing discussions, we all realized that while our system was comprehensive (albeit bureaucratic) and inclusive of all known prevention methodologies, it lacked one critical element... flexibility.

An effective safety and health management system must be relevant to the hazard(s) it's designed to control. In most cases, this can be achieved through four fundamental elements (i.e., Principles of Prevention): Accountability; Analysis; Hazard Control; and Education/Training. Within each of these elements exists a number of "things" (actions, activities, initiatives, etc.), all known to be effective means of prevention. From a 'headquarters' perspective, the focus primarily need only be on the four fundamental elements, while the organizational units determine the most appropriate means of prevention delineated in the safety and health management system.

Of the several methodologies within the Principles of Prevention, only a few need to be mandatory or prescribed (incident investigation and communication for example). To the extent allowed by OSHA/MSHA, the system ought to allow flexibility in selecting which controls are implemented. Managers of organizational units



should have the authority to develop an action plan for preventing losses in their unit, utilizing the safety and health management system as a primary resource. The actions contained in the plan for eliminating or controlling hazards, once approved, becomes their

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responsibility. Accountability for results can then be established {Responsibility + Authority = Accountability}.

- In summary, an effective occupational safety and health management system:
- Establishes specific accountability for the entire organization;
  - Provides a repository of proven methods for identifying/controlling hazards, and serves as a guide for implementation;
  - Allows some degree of flexibility by organizational units for prevention efforts to be targeted to specific historic loss causation;
  - Requires appropriate "advocacy" within the organizational units (full-time or part-time resources with specific coordinating responsibilities);
  - Establishes clear goals, action plans and evaluation standards that can be periodically audited (up-stream indicators), and results measured (down-stream indicators);
  - Provides a rich source of safety and health education, training and development opportunities; and
  - Serves as a primary resource for adapting preventive methodologies to specific loss exposures and experiences.

**END**

