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Is There Such a Thing as Too Much Improvement?

BYLINE: By Kevin Cooper

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Improving your print business requires tireless dedication to continuous improvement and a constant push for higher performance levels, lower costs and better quality. A logical question that arises: How high do you set the bar? What is enough, or when can you be satisfied with what you've attained?

There is a tendency to use superlatives when describing things in this country. In sports we have the Super Bowl and the World Series; in industry we have world-class manufacturing. Championships are won with world-class athletes and companies excel through world-class performance. But what does it mean to achieve this? Do you have to be world-class if you want to be successful?

An example that relates to every print business is the issue of safety. What does it mean to be world-class in safety? Obviously, incurring zero accidents would certainly seem to qualify a printer to claim world-class status. But is that really the case? Let's take a closer look at what it means to be world-class in anything, and at safety specifically.

World-class performance means you've set a standard to which others aspire. It's subjective and somewhat in the eye of the beholder. But in terms of safety performance the following four actions would occur:

Management consistently supports safety. Company culture makes safety an uncompromised priority. Injuries are eliminated. Others use your plant as a benchmark for comparison.

So, how do you drive your plant to these levels and achieve world-class safety performance? It all starts with senior management making it a priority and giving safety the same priority as other espoused values.

Management must communicate a clear, consistent message on the importance of safety and on the belief that accidents are preventable. Accountability for safe work practices at all levels is imperative. Safety must be recognized as part of every employee's performance appraisal and review. It is not enough to talk up safety without rewarding employees and consciously evaluating their contributions to making the work environment accident-free.

Safety cannot be delegated to human resources or any staff responsibility. Every employee must feel safety is part of his or her ongoing responsibilities, and every employee must feel empowered to act on correcting unsafe work conditions.

It is not enough to talk up the importance of safety without supporting it with resources. Money-for training, for process improvements, for recognition events (when objectives are reached) and for ongoing education-is crucial to achieving world-class results. Employees won't always hear what you say, but they'll act after watching what you do.

World-class safety performance makes your plant more competitive. It means your employees are consistently at work, and jobs are consistently produced for your customers. The investment in becoming the safety benchmark eliminates the costs of accidents.

It's not easy to rise to the pinnacle of anything. In our example, leading printers view safety performance as a competitive advantage. But taking this long-term view can apply to all aspects of your business.

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