Solve the Problem…
So it Stays Solved!

Joe Monaco
National LIFTOR Licensing Systems, USA

Edward W. Schneider
Peacham Pedagogics, USA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study explores how a performance management system was developed to address recurring health and safety issues in an organization. Performance improvement technologists were recruited to address the problem and ensure that it stayed solved. The authors describe the process that was used to develop a training program that eventually evolved to a full scale Performance Management (PM) System. Today, nearly three decades later, the PM System has endured with its original mission intact; it has influenced the international dialog on forklift operator safety; and it provides, through ongoing field research, insights into how a Performance Management system might endure past the first change in the management that championed it.

ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND

Early in my career I had the good fortune to work for a large European, cosmetics company doing business in the USA. I started as an "operations trainer" in a recently acquired division, tasked with custom design of instructional systems for skilled and semi-skilled jobs in factories and distribution centers. Shortly after I was hired,

the Senior Vice-President of Administration, called me to his office, explained a situation that clearly caused him concern, and then he asked me the key question, "Can you help me to solve this problem…so it STAYS solved?"

What Was the Problem?

The Vice- President explained the situation: Four months ago, a 20-year-old woman was in a forklift accident. The doctors are still deciding whether they are going to amputate her leg. She was a temporary employee, not a forklift operator, and during her regular lunch break, decided to step onto an electric-powered, stand-on model that was parked with the power on.

At this meeting, I learned from our extensive discussion that he was personally concerned for the injured woman, and what might happen to others if he didn't take effective action. Although it was rare, this was not the first forklift related injury in the company's warehouses. He was hopeful that, with help, it would be the last. His immediate superiors were concerned with the negative fall-out from being publicly known as the company in the beauty/fashion industry that carelessly injures its young female employees…an image that contradicted a brand representing beauty, wholesome fun, sexy, high energy and youthfulness. Then too, the division was recently acquired by a European firm that was sensitive to possible national political resistance to its growth strategy of acquiring American companies. The firm was being extremely careful.

I replied that I understood his request, and was delighted to have such a project. I agreed to report back in two weeks with my recommendations.

During the ten years I was employed by this company, I was pleased to learn that its management committed a lot of resources to the engineering of worker health and safety to meet their own high standards. This worked for product quality and it would also work for industrial safety. The Performance Management (PM) System would eventually develop from an operator training program to a comprehensive Performance System that today is employed in a number of warehouse and distribution center venues. It has influenced the international dialog and government regulation on powered industrial truck (forklift) safety. Indeed, solving the problem was not enough! Keeping it solved has been the ongoing mission.

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