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EDITORIAL COMMENTS: Where have you gone, Paul O'Neill?

The CEO carousel constantly threatens safety

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Once upon a time there was an organization that suffered a terrible accident. Lives were lost, and reporters peppered the leadership: Why, why, why did this happen? What are you going to do? Can you guarantee this loss will never occur again?

Senior leaders of the organization privately were stunned, shocked. How could this gut-wrenching loss of life ever occur on their watch? They felt personally responsible. An investigation was launched by a panel of experts familiar with the organization's operations. The press awaited their conclusions and recommendations.

Numerous technical problems were uncovered contributing to the tragedy. Also, it was determined the organization's decision-making was plagued by hubris and a climate of intimidation. Young engineers sitting on the periphery of meetings feared raising safety concerns. This is a damn dangerous business, they were told time and again. Zero risk is not an option. Safety softies like you keep putting us behind schedule.

But senior leaders accepted that things must change. The organization went to work on necessary technical fixes. An outside group came in and conducted surveys and interviews to assess the extent of fear, "bullying" and under-reporting of potential hazards. The organization's top boss threw his support behind improving communications. New processes coached managers and supervisors to accept, even encourage, dissenting opinions. Every month, the top boss himself spent two hours in a private coaching session.

Slowly the organization seemed to be opening up. Survey scores improved. "I'm conducting my branch meetings and day-to-day interactions differently as part of this effort," said a division chief.

Then the top boss made a personal decision to leave the

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organization, desiring a career change. His replacement had been waiting years for his chance to run the show. Soon he cleaned house, replacing scores of senior managers. He wants people on his wavelength, explained one employee.

The new boss had a different style, blunt and remote. He also had a different take on the organization's safety issues. Engineering would solve the problems, not attitude surveys and learning how to be a better listener. There would be no time on the coaching couch for this boss.

We will take responsibility for safety management ourselves, he said, giving the boot to the outsiders. We'll set up leadership training councils and other programs. His spokesman explained: "Our commitment to safety is always evolving. We'll adjust activities as appropriate."

Say what?

Been there, done that

Told you so, said many safety pros in industry when they heard the news. Having seen many companies run hot and cold on safety over the years, they doubted this organization was truly serious about ending decades of putting pride, competitiveness and deadline pressures before safety worries.

Happens all the time, a veteran safety pro would say. Your program is only as strong as the involvement coming down from the top. Indeed, in organizations surveyed by *ISHN* that defined themselves as world class in safety, 48 percent said CEO leadership is the number one factor driving safety initiatives and investments. In organizations that described themselves as average in safety, CEOs are much less an influence. Only 22 percent of these businesses pointed to the top exec as a driving force.

With CEOs coming and going like free agents in pro sports, that spells trouble for many a safety department. The 5,000th CEO departure since August 1999 was recorded earlier this summer by Challenger, Gray & Christmas, Inc., an outplacement firm. May was the fourth straight month this year registering more than 100 CEO changes.

For worker protection, CEO musical chairs promises more vague talk about adjusting activities as events unfold. That's not the kind of leadership that drives safety performance. Too bad Paul O'Neill has left the corporate world. "Safety is not a priority at Alcoa, it is a precondition," he once said while running the aluminum giant. "Telling employees we can get to zero incidents is a way to show caring about people. This is leadership. Leadership owns safety," he said.

Someone should tape O'Neill for new CEO orientation training. But

how many CEOs would blow it off? O'Neill retired as chairman of Alcoa in 2000, and he's still often quoted at safety conferences, because no exec has made the case for safety so forcefully since he became one of the 5,000 ex-CEOs.

— *Dave Johnson, Editor*

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