It is time to stop seeing workers as the problem and to start seeing workers as the solution: Safety in a world that requires your organization to become even safer.

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"If you are going to better understand failure in your organization, you must first understand how your organization reacts to failure."

Sidney Dekker,
The Field Guide to Understanding Human Error

A Case Study
Three workers are in the process of unloading plate steel from the back of a 53' tractor-trailer flatbed. This process is done several times a day at this facility. The process involves rigging and lifting steel plates off a trailer and placing these steel plates on a "live table" that moves the extremely heavy plates of steel inside the facility. Once the plates are on the "live-table" they are no longer in need of being lifted or suspended. The process of moving these plates within the facility has been engineered to remove most of the potential dropping and crushing hazard. Virtually all the risk for this operation happens in rigging, unloading, and moving the plates from the truck to the plate moving system within the facility.

The work environment includes a driveway for the truck, a lift, a rigging area, and a barricaded lifting area used to keep people from being near (or underneath) the heavy steel plates as the plates are unloaded. Generally speaking, the workspace has thoughtfully and over time become a very safe and stable place to do this high-risk work.

This work this day would be considered normal, the conditions this day are normal, and these specific workers have done this task many times. There was no reason to think this day would be any different than the other days doing this task. Nothing new or unusual was noted in the planning or execution of this task on this day, with one minor exception. Normally, unloading and placing these heavy sheets of steel on to the "live table" is a four-person task, however today one of the crew members was pulled from the work-site in order to complete a mandatory, compliance-based training requirement at the company's main office. The normal crew of four was reduced to a crew of three.

And then it happened. During the unloading activity, and because one of the rigger position was being left open, a giant and very heavy piece of plate steel dropped. Thousands of pounds of suspended load fell without notice or warning. The load fell right in the middle of the work area. The load fell directly inside the barricaded and marked area. The load hit the ground, but not one worker was hurt. A plate of steel fell out of its rigging and on to the ground within the barricaded area.

This work team had an event.

The Question?
Was this event a success or a failure?

The Answer
The answer is both. If production matters most: This is a failure. If safety matters most: This is clearly a success. The workers predicted where the steel would fall and when it fell it fell exactly where they thought it would fall. If you are interested in reliable operations: This is a successful failure.

How you see an event colors how you respond to an event. Your reaction to an event tells the organization everything there is to know about the event.

You can blame and punish safety problems away or you can learn and improve.
I spend much of my time talking to organizational leaders who want to talk in great detail about discipline and accountability. The leaders often begin this conversation by saying something like this, "this safety stuff is fine and good, but at what point does personal accountability kick in?"

Those words are code words for "If people were just better or smarter or more obedient they would not have accidents on my job site."

Either way, it is wrong headed and damaging to creating a safe and stable workplace. What is even more frightening is the fact that old thinking actually moves the organization backwards in to worse reporting, worse prevention, and ultimately more accidents.

Why We Must Talk About Managements Responses
Let's start with the assumption that managers want what is best for the organization. Managers don't want to hurt people. Mangers want the organization to be stable, productive, and absolutely safe. Given that assumption, what could a manger do that could possibly make safety worse – harder to manage, harder to prevent events, more accidents and injuries.

There are a couple of lessons laying hidden in manager's behaviors that will help us better understand and discuss the need to punish accidents out of an organization.

1. Managers have not had the opportunity to learn that the old ways of understanding behavior and systems have changed – a lot – in the last 15 years.
2. Safety is present in the practice of work. Hazards ebb and flow from our systems all the time.

Help Mangers Understand New Ways of Thinking
If we don't have these conversations with managers – if we don't teach them new ways to approach problem solving and safety management – where will these managers get this new knowledge? The universe teaches me this lesson over and over again. When I see managers going back towards "old school" behavior, my first response is to teach.

If your boss wants to punish safety into effectiveness – you should teach them why that idea is counterproductive and harmful. Create an opportunity for a conversation about the importance of the choice between punishment and improvement. After some discussion they will believe it.

You are a teacher – a change agent – and culture guide and don't forget it.

Safety Exists in Practice
We must stop thinking that if we would plan better, write a better procedure, do a better job of hazard identification; we would have avoided the bad thing that happened in our organization.

It is a strange set of truths: Safety does not live in planning. Yet planning is vital to safety. We have to realize that safety exist in practice. Workers are constantly being met with problems in the field in which they must create solutions.   That relationship around discovering a problem and uncovering a solution for that problem is where safety happens all day long, every day.

Pretending that planning has super-human power feels right and good, its just not as powerful and post-job learning. Planning and pre-job preparation is one part of a good safety management system. It is not the best part. It is not the most important part. It is one good part of a how a safe organization does work.

It is a choice
The key is to realize that you must chose between discipline and learning. You cannot have both at the same time. If you chose to discipline the worker, you are choosing not to learn from the event. If you chose to learn from the event, you have given away the opportunity to discipline the worker for screwing up.

Which one of these two choices makes for a better long-term strategy for your organization?