

2017-09 - Hurricane Harvey And Our Approach Toward Safety

Dear Colleagues,

Our plants and employees along the Texas Gulf Coast were impacted by the recent flooding event associated with Hurricane Harvey. I would like to thank all those at our sites for their efforts in securing their assets, protecting themselves, their families, and the communities in which they operate. Many of these same co-workers have suffered personal losses and I wish them the best as they rebuild. I have heard many stories of people helping each other, as well as, total strangers. It is this willingness to help and look after one another that is essential to ensuring we all go home safe at the end of the day.

We often look to indicators to measure our safety performance. With Safety, the one indicator we are all familiar with is the Medical Treatment Accident Rate (MTAR). In a way, this is a measurement of our "failures," namely the frequency at which we are injured. We place a lot of emphasis on this measure and we put a significant amount of effort into reducing the number of failures. In business, our motivation to improve and deliver results comes through our successes – e.g. it is much a more positive (and maybe powerful) message to celebrate that we acquired three new customers than it is to celebrate that we only lost one customer. Why don't we do the same for Safety? Instead of being so focused on the number of failures, why not put our attention and effort into those activities and initiatives that support and reinforce the safety culture we desire and our ultimate goal that we all go home safe at the end of the day. This does not mean that we stop measuring our failures or learning from them; it just means that if our desire to succeed is driven by the "number," we will always be reactive and it will be very difficult to achieve and maintain the level of Safety performance we desire. If the number of incidents is going down, we may celebrate and switch to "auto-pilot" mode – everybody is happy, but complacency becomes a risk. However, if the number is increasing, we react, often adding a new program, increasing communication, sending in help, etc. And, when it is flat, we don't always know what to do, but we feel the need to do something – we need to "fix" it – get it moving down again. Instead of being reactive, I think it is better to be proactive. It is like maintenance, you can focus on corrective maintenance, preventive maintenance, or even predictive maintenance. In general, a site that focuses on predictive maintenance will be much more reliable than a site that focuses on corrective maintenance. This doesn't mean that a site that focuses on corrective maintenance won't have some long periods between failures, but by definition, they will always have failures.

What is your approach toward safety?

As we saw with the response of our co-workers and friends to Harvey, the foundation to grow the safety culture we want is already present on our sites, it is within all of us. It is our responsibility as leaders to support our employees and create the environment for it to grow. It is not so different from growing a plant. You prepare the soil and plant the seed. The plant doesn't miraculously appear the next day (unless you are Jack and you planted a magic seed). If you feed it, ensure it gets the right amount of light and water, and use some Solvay products, eventually the plant will grow. If the plant is not growing fast enough (i.e. you become impatient - reactive) and you start giving it extra water or maybe additional fertilizer, it could do more harm than good, possibly killing the plant. The point being – if you have the right plan in place to grow the culture you want, don't be impatient, if you are doing the right things, the culture you want will grow. Now, once the plant starts growing and looking good, you can't neglect it, you must continue to care for it and nurture it. And, over time it will become more and more resilient.

I encourage each of you to think about what you are already doing and what you can do to grow the culture you need to ensure that everyone goes home safe at the end of the day.

James