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Be Prepared

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In a coal mine in Wyoming, a man was killed. The mine had an excellent safety record and is very safety conscious. The workers were shaken by the realization that in spite of all they did, there were unforeseeable factors that can still take a life. I was called in to consult with the company. I met with many of the workers and asked them if there was anything about the accident that they felt represented some good quality about the company. Every group agreed that once the tragic accident had occurred, everyone acted rapidly and correctly. They feel proud that they all know their jobs and can respond even to an accident that was completely unpredictable.

Being Prepared

As a young boy scout, I learned the scout motto, “Be Prepared.” The mine company had put that motto into action. They had trained and prepared for all sorts of problems, so that when one occurred, they were ready. What difference did that make? First, it reassured the workers that high standards are expected of them. Second, the workers were eager to come to work because they were confident that the company would be able to make some sense of this accident. And third, because of that preparation, the mine returned to full productivity much earlier. The preparation earned to company high employee morale. Even in the grief they all felt, the sense of loyalty to the company was palpable.

Assess Your Organization

What are you prepared to confront? The lessons we learn from the mine event make us reflect.

Are you constantly training your employees in handling emergencies?

Do you have written policies for such things as a bomb threat, natural disaster, hostage or violent coworkers and other events?

Do your workers view the workplace as a safety focused environment? What do you do to create safety?

How do you want workers to respond to a co-worker who makes threats of violence?

What expectations do employees understand about tolerance and respect? How do they know what they are supposed to do if they are around sexual harassment or racial discrimination?

Do your employees believe they are empowered to make quick decisions to support safety, productivity, and customer satisfaction?

How good are you at involving employees in planning and training for emergencies?

Take Action

I suggest organizational focus groups designed to answer the questions I pose above. Ask the groups questions like:

“Please rate, on a 1 to 10 scale, how prepared you believe our workplace is for various emergencies. What would make you raise the rating by ten percent?”

“What would be one thing that could be done at work to better prepare for an emergency?”

“How are employees supposed to respond to (specific incidents, including threats of violence, sexual harassment, and so on)? What do they really do?”

“Rate the satisfaction you feel about company training in those areas. What would have to happen to make you raise that rating by ten percent?”

The information you get from such questions gives you a way to focus your own efforts. There is a good deal of knowledge and wisdom in your organization, and tapping that understanding is an effective way to improve.