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How to Reduce Employee Injuries

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MDS 495: Capstone Action Project Paper:

How to Reduce Employee Injuries

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Abstract

This MDS Capstone Project's purpose is to bring forth knowledge, various resources, and different perspectives to help reduce employee injuries at Bettencourt & Crossbred Dairies. I chose this project because I was interested in understanding why there had been a steady increase in employee injuries on the dairy farms. In addition, I wanted to explore which departments and locations had increased employee work-related injuries and understand the dynamics surrounding these findings. The conclusion from my research was a need to increase safety awareness across all departments and provide educational information for accident prevention. Along with this information, there was a need to get injured employees back to light or modified work after they were released from their physician.

The tangible product from this project is an updated Safety Program /Manual for Bettencourt and Crossbred Dairies which aims to promote a more robust safety culture from the owners, front-line managers to the employees. The goals and objectives are to ultimately decrease employee injuries across the dairy farming operation which will therefore reduce the overall workman's compensation costs.

Keywords: *Safety culture, safety-awareness, dairy farming.*

Introduction

As I explored topics for my Capstone Project, I saw many opportunities to focus my attention on my professional sphere of influence. For example, I am a partner in a dairy farming business in Jerome, Idaho. My partnership in this entity encompasses other partners who own larger dairy farms in the surrounding areas. As I looked into the cost of production on my farm, Crossbred Dairy, LLC., and parent company, Bettencourt Dairies, LLC., I identified a need to look into the current safety program. This realization led me to ask why the workmen's compensation costs had steadily increased for the last several years. These findings provided me with a fantastic opportunity to help find a creative solution to this problem.

The stakeholders for this project are the owners of Crossbred Dairy and Bettencourt Dairies, the Director of Operations, the Human Resource Manager, the front-line managers, and the employees working in the various dairy farm departments.

Bringing Together Perspectives

While gathering information, I noticed several essential elements that captured my attention. The first key element that I learned from my initial research was changing the company culture by making the entire organization accountable and responsible for safety and accident prevention. In addition to the value of holding people accountable for safety at the business, managers must provide effective communication on how to reduce employee injuries by setting an example and implementing expectations and goals. These expectations must be rooted in proper safety training and feedback in each department, assuring that the education was adequate. For example, when managers train employees on the importance of doing their job safely, they must also ask the employees to give feedback on what they learned, whether an oral or written test, to ensure the information was communicated effectively.

Another essential element to safety that I discerned from my research and by gathering different perspectives was that if an accident or near accident occurs, it is vital to communicate to all employees what happened, how it happened, and how to keep it from happening again. This critical information will bring awareness to the injury or near-miss accident so that employees understand the consequences of unsafe practices. For example, according to Brisk (2016), avoid shortcuts, “many accidents happen not because the safety precautions are unknown, but because people take shortcuts when they are familiar with their job or are in a hurry” (p.5). As a result, it can lead to an increase in workplace accidents.

In addition to avoiding shortcuts while performing a task, it is essential to avoid distractions while working. According to an article in Entrepreneur, “the average person in the U.S. views their cellphone 52 times per day” (Rampton, 2021, p.3). Whether using the cell phone to make a phone call, email, texting, or participate in social media, it is a distraction and potential hazard while operating a vehicle, machinery, or performing work. Therefore, it is critical to be present, be mindful, and pay attention while completing daily tasks to avoid accidents.

Another important practice to avoid employee injuries is always keeping the workplace clean and free of clutter. In his evaluation, Brisk noted that “most people don’t think of cleanliness as a deterrent to accidents, but workplace order actually does diminish the chance of injuries” (2016, p.3). Therefore, by keeping the workplace clean and well-maintained dramatically decreases the chance of accidents.

Creating Innovative Approaches: Beyond Either/Or

To successfully work towards an innovative approach, beyond either/ or, I needed to look beyond the problem itself and see the project through the integrative thinking process using metacognition, empathy, and creativity (Riel & Martin, 2017).

In addition to changing the way problems are typically solved, the authors show us how to articulate opposing modules to find a great new choice (Riel & Martin, 2017). For example, I initially aimed to reduce employee injuries throughout the dairy farm to decrease the massive cost of workman's compensation insurance costs each year. According to the workman's compensation claim report, the dairy farm has an insurance mod rating of 1.47, which equals a higher than the average employee injury occurrence for the last four years. However, as I researched and analyzed essential data, I saw this problem in a whole new light. I could see that I needed to take the existing safety model, learn from the original model and find a better, more creative model or solution.

As Roger Martin stated in a YouTube video, "the ability to face constructively the tension of opposing models and instead of choosing one at the expense of the other, generate a creative resolution of the tension in the form of a new model that contains elements of the individual models but is superior to each" (2019, 1.41 seconds). In doing so, the research pointed to creating a safety culture that promoted awareness, education, and training in accident prevention, which made a new future for decreasing reoccurring employee injuries. Furthermore, the dairy farm can cultivate a culture of safety throughout its organization by being proactive and focusing on problem prevention instead of being reactive after the injury occurs.

Awareness of Self and Others

As I narrowed down the focus on problem prevention, I collaborated with several key individuals. These resourceful people included agricultural insurance carrier representatives, the head of risk services in Southern Idaho, individuals from the State Insurance Fund, the front-line managers, the human resources manager, and the director of operations at the dairy farm. These individuals provided different perspectives on safety awareness, loss prevention, and accident

reporting. The main takeaway they all agreed upon was the need for continuous safety training in all departments to avoid complacency. For example, employees get injured due to hurrying with their tasks and skipping steps in the process. Another issue, according to the feedback from the State Insurance Fund, is that new employees less than one year on the job are the ones who have the highest number of injuries. So, education, training, and continuous coaching are vital in reducing employee accidents and injuries.

In addition to the feedback I received from these key individuals, I reached out to several dairy farmers in my area. I asked them what worked to keep the employee injuries down in their operations. These questions led to many insights; for example, one dairyman shared that safety starts at the top. If he didn't care about safety, why should his employees care? He made safety a priority. In doing so, he held employees accountable for their actions. If he caught an employee doing something unsafe, he fired them immediately and let the other employees know. He has a zero-tolerance implemented in his policies and procedures safety manual.

After gathering information from other dairy farmers, I conducted more research by looking into every employee's injury claim on all dairy farm locations over the last several years. I then made a spreadsheet indicating which dairies had the most employee accidents and coded where the incidents occurred and why. I then documented which accidents happened the most frequently. My results concluded that Bettencourt Dairy #1 and #2 had the highest number of accidents. The accidents occur the most in the milk parlors, followed by outside machinery. Many of the injuries that I noticed were from slips or falls due to obstacles in work areas. For example, in one report, an employee at the Bettencourt Dairy #2 tripped over a bag of towels that was improperly placed. As a result, this employee fell and hit her head, causing a significant contusion to her forehead.

Another example was when an employee tripped over a hose in the milk barn at Bettencourt Dairy #4. The hose was not properly put away, causing an unsafe situation. All of this vital information from my research helped me see safety awareness opportunities in a whole new way.

Consideration of the Audience: Emotional Intelligence

As I continued to research and explore different perspectives, I realized I needed to understand the cultural and educational dynamics of the entire dairy farming operation. English and Spanish speaking employees work in the various departments, making it necessary for all written and oral communication provided in both languages. Another critical component is that the information needs to be simple and easily understood by all educational levels.

Another essential element I found was that safety has certain emotions that come with it. Therefore, fostering and effectively communicating safety at the workplace will promote a healthy environment. According to Howell, part of psychological safety in the workplace is expressing oneself, being curious, and asking questions when learning takes place (2019). For example, when a new employee is being trained on their specific duties and learning the importance of safety, it is essential to ask for feedback and encourage them to ask questions to feel valued and comfortable with their training.

Value to Others: Emotional Intelligence

In addition to fostering an open environment for learning, growing, training, and developing, it is essential to cultivate empathy with all individuals. "Empathy is a purposeful and directed attempt to understand others and their experiences. A curiosity about others, and a desire to see the world as they do" (Riel & Martin, 2017, pp.49-50). For example, it was crucial to understand the dairy operation dynamics, the different departments, tasks, work environment,

education levels, and diversity surrounding the business to promote effective safety awareness and accident prevention programs. It was also essential to understand each stakeholder and see how they viewed safety, training, education, and accident prevention.

This entire process has had challenges along the way. For example, Silvia, the Human Resource Manager, was pleased that I was willing to help produce an updated Safety Program/Manual on which she could draw on. However, the Director of Operations, Mike, was skeptical at first. He gave me push back several times as we collaborated and discussed the need for more safety training. However, as I continued to receive feedback from my stakeholders, it became clear that they all welcomed the increased need to bring more safety awareness and accident prevention to the dairy farm.

The Creative Framework and Unique Approach

The creative framework part of the integrative thinking process helped me look outside the box. For example, in the book, *Creating Great Choices*, the authors emphasize the need to defer judgment, meaning “our natural instinct to judge ideas” (2017, p.167). Instead, we must think creatively by looking at multiple ideas, collaborating, making connections, and building on the ideas collectively. This unique approach to solving problems will produce a better outcome.

Another part of the integrative approach to solving problems is practicing patience. It allows for metacognition to continuously take place throughout the process. Riel and Martin talk about how important it is to understand our thinking and control it using self-awareness and self-control (2017). For example, as I dug deeper into my Capstone Project, I needed to remind myself to use curiosity, openness, patience and think through my thinking and not jump to a conclusion or solution right away.

Accomplishment of Capstone

After many hours of research, writing, collaborating, and asking for feedback from the various stakeholders week after week, I completed the updated Safety Program /Manual for Bettencourt and Crossbred Dairies. I put the manual into a binder so that all documents could be easily accessible to all stakeholders and sent an email pdf of the various material, training information, dairy safety videos, and websites I obtained from the data for the project. Finally, I met with the stakeholders and discussed that this project was only the beginning. My hope and goal for the business are to see employee injuries steadily decrease to zero.

Innovative Approach to the Problem/Project

For my innovative approach to help effectively reduce employee injuries, I took the current safety model used by the dairy operation. I updated the safety program model using the integrative thinking process. I incorporated many other valuable safety features, including a safety vision statement and a management direction policy that shows that the stakeholders take ownership of the safety program. In addition to this material, I wrote out safety goals, responsibilities, participation from the owners, front-line managers, and employees. I also included many safety training documents, each specific to agriculture, along with safety training and certification documents. These documents will help keep track of each employee's training experience and ensure everyone participates in the overall program.

Along with the safety training and certification documents, I provided policies and procedures that help with accident reporting and documentation and return to work forms that explain to the employees that there will be light or modified work for them when they return to work. It is critical to get employees back to work once their physician releases them.

Benefits and Impact on Stakeholders

The benefits of this Capstone Project aim to increase safety awareness and accident prevention, which will result in lower employee injuries on the dairy farm each year. In addition, this impact will decrease the overall cost of workman's compensation insurance premiums each year, equating hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of savings to the current workman's costs.

For example, by reducing employee injuries by 25%, the dairies will positively benefit by lowering their workman's compensation claims, which equals \$500,000 of saving per year to their workman's compensation insurance costs. This result is a win-win for the operation! This benefit will help the owners financially. The other benefit to the owners is increased safety awareness and accountability from the managers and the employees. The managers will benefit from having updated safety documents to provide continuous safety training and certification to each employee. The employees will benefit because they will receive updated safety information from the managers and be held accountable for practicing safety while conducting their daily tasks at the dairy farm. Each stakeholder will benefit from safety awareness and accident prevention throughout the entire operation.

Conclusion

I learned a great deal throughout the Capstone Project. Along with going through the steps of the integrative learning and thinking process to solve my problem, I learned various communication skills, research skills, collaboration skills and brought many different perspectives on safety and accident prevention. Working with safety specialists, I learned what documents and training information were most beneficial to dairy farming businesses. I also learned that bringing new information to the stakeholders is not always smooth.

Along with the integrative thinking, problem-solving, communication, and collaboration skills, I learned how to put together a safety program manual using information from OSHA

websites, State Insurance Fund websites, Dairy Industry Association articles, and research from expert safety consultants. During the last seven weeks, I have learned that it is critical to managing my time each week to finish weekly assignments in all my classes and budget eight hours or more a week dedicated to my Capstone Project and still balance my work and home life.

Overall, I truly enjoyed the process of working each week to complete my MDS 495 Capstone Project. I am happy with the benefits, outcomes, and impacts it has had on the stakeholders. I am also excited about all the knowledge, education, skills, perspectives, and overall experience I gained throughout this semester. I am grateful for this opportunity to further my educational experience and appreciate all my professors leading, guiding, and directing me through each week.

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