

BUILDING A SAFER WORKFORCE

Culture Eats Safety for Breakfast: How We Reduced Worker Injuries by 70% and Built a Place Where People Really Want to Work



Introduction

In 2018, a major city in the upper Midwest had reached the breaking point. The City's Sewer Maintenance Department had experienced very high injury rates for years, and it was getting worse until new leadership was brought in. These injuries were costly, increased absenteeism, and resulted in reduced capacity for the department. They were also a sign of a deeper problem. "We have too many injuries and a culture problem," declared the City's Maintenance Superintendent. The new division manager promised, "No one is dying on my watch."

To address this issue, the City engaged with Esch Consulting in a comprehensive program to change the culture and reduce the injury rate. The result over three years was a dramatic 70% drop in injuries, according to the City's Division Manager for the Sewer Maintenance Department. Here's how it happened.



The Problem

The big red flag in the Sewer Department was the injury rate. Injury rates among workers were running several times the national average, which resulted in abnormally high absenteeism and soaring medical, insurance, and legal costs to the City. Employees were stressed and the department was stretched to capacity to get the work done.

These problems, however, revealed a deeper issue of work culture. Leadership realized they had three issues in the Sewer Department driving the problem:

- Ineffective leadership and disempowered supervision contributed to a lack of safety awareness.
- Negative work culture characterized by low morale, resistance to change, and a lackadaisical attitude.
- Poor communication on job sites, especially related to safety and personal accountability.

As a prime indicator of the toxic culture, leadership was concerned that workers may even be faking injuries, lying about them, or even purposely getting injured to avoid working. Something had to change.

A Toxic Work Culture Is an Unsafe Work Culture

Research has shown that work culture has a large impact on safety in the construction industry. Shaming and demeaning work cultures tend to silence people who would otherwise speak up. Emotions run high and the day can be filled with negativity and complaining. Standard operating procedures, particularly about safety, are often ignored in such workplaces. Even foremen and supervisors are ignored because there are few consequences. Workers who would otherwise adopt safe practices are shunned, or they leave their jobs.

Telltale signs of this culture problem included the following.

- Injuries and “near misses” were underreported, or not reported at all
- Helmets weren’t worn on job sites
- Visibility vests were not worn
- Safety goggles were not used when they should have been
- Teams were not using a Job Hazard Analysis protocol to identify safety concerns and take appropriate action to reduce risks
- Failure to follow protocols for clearing sewer lines (e.g. failure to use catch basins)
- Workers did not buckle seatbelts in City vehicles
- Worksite anger resulted in confrontations and fear that a conflict could escalate
- Foremen, supervisors, and managers were disrespected and dismissed

All of these are cultural problems, but there were additional issues.

- Some workers took extended lunches of over two hours
- Many workers punched in on time, but didn’t begin working for 30 minutes or more
- Workers came in from the field early and took on busy work until their shift was over
- Workers frequently cut each other down or belittled each other
- Workers often showed contempt for their foremen, supervisors, and leadership
- Overall poor morale and bad attitudes were the norm

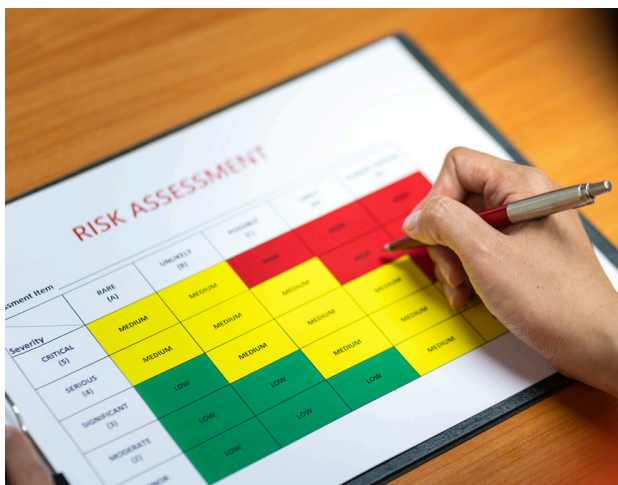
The City had hallmarks of all of them.

A Program for Change

The City brought in Esch Consulting to guide them through the culture change process. With the buy-in and support of department leadership, Esch designed, developed, and deployed a three-year program to effect the necessary change. Here is an outline of the program. The services delivered were aimed more at enrolling workers to value their own lives and safety, than enforcing external safety rules or attempting to control behavior.

Assessment and Preparation

Esch began with a series of consultations with key division managers. A Safety Advisory Group was formed. Then, after about three months of preparation, together they launched the initiative with a kick-off meeting including the entire staff of the department. Esch worked with the leaders to set the agenda, survey those attending, prepare the speakers, and deliver an inspiring message.



Culture Change Initiative — Kick-Off and Celebration

At the Kick-Off gathering, signs of contempt were on full display. Two workers had their feet up on a table and were reluctant to remove them. Others ignored the speakers or made negative comments. Even so, the moderator was firm and professional. The organizing team and the executive managers stayed unified in their message. By the end, the event set a positive new tone among the workers. Liking it or not, they were set up to expect the coming changes.

Part of that first Kick-Off meeting involved a survey. The Safety Advisory Group wanted to get an accurate baseline for some of the goals we had set for ourselves. Staff were asked questions like:

- “What will help reduce injuries?”
- “How committed are you to supporting this work?”
- “How often does your crew do a hazard awareness drill before the job?”

Subsequent all-team celebration gatherings were held twice a year during the engagement, usually involving a luncheon or breakfast. Over time, with much training and coaching, attitudes improved. By the final meeting, three years later, there were many signs of improvement. Negativity had been significantly reduced. It was apparent that a new workplace culture had formed.

Safety Advisory Group

With input from the senior managers, Esch organized and facilitated the establishment of a safety advisory group for the project. The group was formed from leaders within the four work areas: Maintenance, Construction, Planning, and The Levee. They met once or twice a month for nearly the entire three years.

Esch intentionally facilitated the type of culture that would reflect the change desired for the larger organization. This involved showing personal care for each member, doing brief check-ins at the beginning of each meeting, and maintaining a high level of accountability about personal commitments. By doing so, the Safety Advisory Group became a community of change agents and generated the required authority to hold others accountable.

Specifically, this group filled these roles:

- Reviewed the data and research on safety and culture
- Participated in the training
- Championed the initiatives in the field
- Provided "eyes and ears" in the field regarding what was happening—issues, challenges, and successes

This group was separate from the regular safety committee, and it had a different focus: to focus on culture, leadership and communication. The advisors maintained a positive connection to the regular safety committee and sent representatives to attend their monthly meetings.

Leadership Program

Esch's program supported foremen, supervisors, and managers. They have the rank and responsibility to initiate tough conversations, coach their teams, and hold them accountable.

- **Four half-day consulting sessions with top managers**
- **13 training programs covering leadership and communication**
- **360 assessments for 26 leaders**
- **Individual Development Plans for all 26 leaders**
- **Personalized coaching**
- **Focused on critical people skills**

Personalized Coaching Themes for Leaders

Selected leaders received additional coaching on requested themes.

- **Reversing the avoidance of crucial conversations**
- **Countering a culture of silence**
- **Encouraging staff to speak up respectfully**
- **Working with difficult people**
- **Holding other workers accountable**



Workshop Topics

Thirteen workshops provided training and new perspectives for leaders, foremen, and supervisors.

- **Communication 101, 201 and 301**
- **Leadership Fundamentals 101**
- **Crucial Conversations 101, 201 and 301**
- **Managing Difficult People 101 and 201**
- **Managing Reptilian Brains 101**
- **A New Look at Stress 101**
- **Accountability and Empathy 101**

Staff Training

In addition to the leadership development initiatives, Esch trained four workgroups.

Respectful Conversations for Teams Training

Esch facilitated an interactive program designed to create an alternative to put downs, belittling, demeaning behaviors. It covered basic skills in respectful communication. Programs were delivered to the various workgroups on location, outside of the central facility, using a circle process.

Signs of Success

While culture change can be notoriously hard to measure, there were many signs of success.

- Reportable injuries fell by 70% per year
- Supervisors began leading stretching drills every day before work. It went from 0% stretching to 98% stretching, according to a report from a senior safety leader
- Compliance with the ACE drill (Assess, Converse, Eliminate Hazards), the Sewer Department's Job Hazard Analysis protocol increased by over 60% (from 52% to 84%)
- Communications improved and there was much less back biting, shaming, and belittling. Workers began to show more signs that they liked each other and were enjoying their work more.
- Workers began to realize they would be held accountable to the SOPs by their supervisors
- Compliance with personal protective equipment (PPE) use increased dramatically, to the point where it became unusual to find anyone not complying on a job site
- Foremen and supervisors reported more ease with crucial conversations—the kind that are necessary but difficult to have to achieve accountability



Leadership Saw the Difference

Signs of cultural change and improved attitudes were visible.

- No more extended lunches
- Workers work full 8-hour days
- More direct conversations
- Better accountability
- Workers like each other and are more humane and considerate in their interactions
- The Sewer Department saw a number of workers joining them from other divisions, primarily due to the positive changes in work culture
- Workers treat standard operating procedures (SOP) as guidelines for their work more frequently

And Specifically Regarding Safety and Culture...

Leadership had these things to say:

- *"We are having much better communication."*
- *"Guys are speaking up about safety."*
- *"Foremen and supervisors are more confident."*
- *"We used to have a lot of attitude, but it is getting better. A guy came to me and apologized. Said he wanted to bury the hatchet."*
- *"The saw operator was using a demo saw, holding it with one hand and using no water. This was an EPA and an OSHA violation. The superintendent went up and talked to him. This would not have been done before."*
- *"Communication and collaboration among team members is improved."*
- *"I've been going into the lunchroom regularly at the end of the workday, and there is no one in there early. Many workers used to gather, about 30 minutes before quitting time, mostly to relax and socialize."*
- *"We worked together to resolve an issue important to both of us in a very collaborative and efficient way. It may be a springboard to rebuilding trust between us as well as open discussion of the tension that has existed for two years."*
- *"Our bottom-line production numbers in sewer maintenance were inadequate, now they are better."*
- *"This is great growth; it is awesome and I feel good about it. I want to make a life here. We have a young robust crew, let's build something great."*
- *"Employees seem happier."*

Signs of Culture Change

As Tom Esch, President of Esch Consulting, says, *"When people begin to trust each other and gain the skills to communicate more effectively, it directly affects safety culture."*

The drop in reportable injuries to 70% over three years was a direct result of the change in culture.

Other workers within the City paid attention. The Sewer Maintenance department became an attractive place to work. Workers were happier and treated respectfully. Workers frequently left departments with more negative cultures to come to the Sewer department—so much so that today, approximately one quarter of the workers in Sewer came there from other departments.



Results

With the leadership of Esch Consulting, the city's sewer department changed the culture of the workforce and produced dramatic effects on safety.

“After three years of leadership development with Tom Esch, we showed a 70% reduction in injuries, on average, per year.”

-Division Manager

In addition to lowering injury rates, the city had great results from the perspective of Human Resources.

“Your work, Tom, and the team effort you’ve been leading within the sewer division is helping us. It is taking up to 80% of the work off our plates in HR.”

-HR Manager

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