

Ethical Leadership is a Reflection of Safety Accountability

By Jay Johnston

When I do a seminar on Leadership, I ask the group to help me list the attributes or qualities of a leader. It is amazing how often the word Ethical goes up on the board.

While we all look for our leaders to be ethical – I believe the foundation of effective leadership lies with accountability. In theory, at the end of the day a leader is accountable for what happens and what does not happen. In practical application the reality is that we are not tested at the end of the day, at the end of the week, month or year. We are tested when an unusually bazaar set of circumstances come together and we have an accident or incident with propane.

I believe the greatest barrier to accountability in the propane industry is the unlikelihood of those circumstances coming together – but when they do WATCH OUT.

That's when we have accountability.

I believe accountability must start at the top, with leadership, before it is put to the test.

We must inspect what we expect and not let complacency rule our leadership practices.

Here's the problem. A company's work force will always emulate its leadership.

If the leaders arrive early and leave late – so will the troops. If the leaders arrive late and leave early – so will the troops. If any one of the leaders makes an exception to safety practices in order to get a sale or accommodate convenience – so will the troops.

It starts when a service or delivery person approaches management on how to solve a problem. When known exceptions are made to accommodate a sale or convenience – a risk has been taken to achieve a reward.

What most managers do not see is that the reward is pennies against hundreds of thousands of dollars of risk. Lot's of exceptions bring lots of risk.

Propane marketers are bootstrappers in nature. All independent marketers started as bootstrappers. Major marketers maintain a bootstrapper management style

with a corporate image of total propriety. Exceptions to rules are not always conscious choices made from an awareness perspective.

The squeaky wheel gets the grease and an unfortunate incident can make a pretty loud squeak. A plaintiff attorney can hear a squeak from hundreds of miles away and that is when lack of accountability can really whack the bottom line.

Up until that point lots of pennies may have been made along the way, It is far less costly and significantly more profitable to be accountable BEFORE you hear a squeak.

Once leadership understands this process of risk and reward it can set the example, inspect what it expects and achieve profitable growth.

From a liability standpoint, the exposures of propane are termed to be low frequency/high severity. This lack of frequency is the most common source of complacent behavior.

Thus, leadership accountability can play a major role in achieving compliance in the field, at the plant and in the office every day.

It starts with comprehensive training beyond knowledge, beyond understanding and into the disciplined practice of consistently safe behavior.

As we all know, behavior can only be achieved through accountability.

With all this said, every operation has it's own culture built upon exceptions or adherence to rules designed to prevent the possibility of an incident or accident. In some cases it is not a matter of direct relation to cause. Sometimes it is related to documentation or the education of customers. It is in these gray areas that most propane liability incidents occur.

And so it is within the smallest concepts of accountability that we eventually end up with the biggest problems.

This is why it is so important that Leadership be accountable and set the example. It is why it is so important for leadership to inspect what they expect to achieve safe growth.

One of the easiest ways to inspect what you expect is to make time for communication with your employees. It starts with being available for small discussions. Asking about their families. Asking about how their day went or what they have planned for the weekend. It must be sincere and from the heart – otherwise you are in the wrong business.

This process opens the door to discuss problems related to your day-to-day operations. It allows you to communicate expected practices. It allows you to listen first hand to real issues as they happen every day. As a leader you have earned the right to be heard and the right to listen to what is happening and what is not happening. As a leader you set the example by your actions and inactions – everyday.

I highly recommend that at your next leadership meeting, you consider these concepts of leadership accountability. Discuss the problems. Design solutions.

Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the Safest of them all?

Jay Johnston (www.TheSafetyLeader.com) is an aggressive insurance consultant, leading safety coach, enthusiastic speaker and nationally recognized safety writer, who designs and implements cutting edge risk management programs for businesses that want to prevent costly “insurance” surprises. You can contact him at (952) 253-2710 or Jay@TheSafetyLeader.com.

© Copyright 2002 Jay Johnston & Associates, Inc. All rights reserved.