

## "Covenants of the Rose" A Belief System for Redefining Operational Safety Excellence

I recall a telephone conversation I had some time ago with a long-time friend, a highly respected peer, and perhaps one of the most progressive thought leaders in our profession today. He spoke of the challenges (and frustrations) he faced as the "safety executive" of a major Fortune 500 company, and how difficult it was to function at that level, as the issues were so unique and complex. At that level of practice, success is all about diagnosing cultural problems and creating transformational change in values, structure and leadership practices. He acknowledged that there were few who could offer insight and credible advice, and was kind enough to grant me such privilege, an honor for which I remain most grateful today.

At that time, I was pursuing a career in safety management consulting, and had discovered that he was indeed correct. There were but few (in my own, or my clients', organizations) who were willing to take the organizational risks, confront the status quo, instigate organizational change (for the better), or incur the political battle scars of "doing the right things." When I met such a person, it was an amazingly refreshing experience. They all had names... D. A., Keith, Dan, Ray, Paul, Pierre, Kelly, Hank, Don, (a lengthy list now), but more importantly they had unique minds... free spirits that refused to be shackled by the conventional "myth-conceptions and wiz-dumbs" of the trade, aka wrong-headed thinking that impeded progress in the right direction!

Over time, these individuals became a loosely knit network of excellence; a network that has grown in number, as I have interacted with many in this trade across four continents. Those who got it were far and few between; however, they were rich in knowledge and experience and, as time would prove, were those who ultimately would be successful. It is from this enlightened group, some of whom had such strong convictions that it cost them their jobs (an event they now look back upon with pride) that the "Royal Order of the ROSE (Redefining Operational Safety Excellence)" has evolved, and the Covenants of Excellence, a belief system for safety excellence, has been forged.

The Royal Order of the ROSE recognizes those in this profession who have stood tall to the challenge, stiffened under bureaucratic pressure, fought the good fight, proudly displayed their scars of conviction and kept on ticking!

The 12 organizational truths that follow are an evolved set of core beliefs forged over 30+ years of observation, research, practical experience and interaction with these progressive thinkers...on what works, and equally as important, what does not, in generating safety excellence results. These foundational truths comprise those critical beliefs which, when embraced by an organization, can enable it to re-define operational safety excellence and achieve operational safety success. These "Covenants of Excellence" are as follows:

**Covenant #1:** Safety is not about preventing accidents, aka "end-of-pipe" reactive activities devoted to finding process problems, physical hazards and at-risk work practices via compliance inspections, job observations and progressive discipline policies.

Safety excellence is all about proactively designing, aligning and improving the operational process; i.e., identifying upstream opportunities to minimize exposures, defects and variances by implementing organizational changes that improve operational effectiveness, increase productivity and minimize loss cost.

**Covenant #2:** At-risk employee behaviors do not cause accidents. Accidents are caused by the reasons for at-risk employee behavior these causes are organizational and cultural in nature... issues of management and leadership.

At-risk behaviors (people) are not the problem; all behavior is caused. To achieve excellence, seek, expose, understand and remedy the good reasons for poor performance, the problems embedded in the management systems and leadership practices of the organization. People don't behave as they believe; people behave as they believe their bosses, the level of fear, the performance metrics, the compensation structure and the recognition and reward systems want them to behave... and then they go home and change.

**Covenant #3:** Accidents are not the problem; the problem(s) are the problem.

Accidents are not unplanned, unforeseeable, fortuitous process outcomes. Accidents are patterned and predictable performance symptoms; the final visible evidences of systemic failings and organizational deficiencies. If there are accidents in an organization, there are systemic organizational problems. To achieve excellence, focus on the systems, not the symptoms of accident causes.

**Covenant #4:** The business process defines, drives and ultimately determines all business outcomes, of which safety is but one.

All organizational outcomes (good or bad, complying or non-complying, on time or late, profitable or unprofitable and safe or unsafe) originate from common headwaters and are delivered by a common system. Accidents are an organizational design, administration and maintenance issue; seek to remedy organizational, managerial and leadership errors of commission and omission.

**Covenant #5:** Employees work in the system; managers work on the system; the system produces accidents; employees sustain injuries. Manage one to minimize the other.

Accidents and their causes, correction, control and costs, are the responsibility of mid-line managers and topside leaders, not the fault of frontline workers. It is unrealistic and unreasonable to ask people to fix a system that they do not design or control. The functions of planning, organizing, directing, controlling, measuring and monitoring work and process are (by definition) components of the management system.

**Covenant #6:** To increase the bottom line, managers must effectively manage the middle lines, of which the cost of L.O. S. S. (Lack Of Safety Strategy) is significant. Safety excellence is ultimately measured below the line, but must be proactively managed above the line.

Minimizing, and at every opportunity eliminating, operational loss, cost and expense is a manager's primary responsibility. This is also called productivity!

(Note: This is Peter Drucker's position. The only things a manager can manage, i.e., plan, organize, direct, control and monitor, are the middle lines losses, costs, and expense, aka accidents, injuries and claims).

**Covenant #7:** Safety performance is a clear, accurate and reflective measure of the strength of an organization's leadership values, management competencies and operational systems.

"How leaders lead, determines how managers manage, and how managers manage, directly impacts how employees perform...including safe vs. unsafe. All organizational outcomes (including negative ones) are a function of: leadership (values), management (practices) and organization (structure and systems). These are strategic business issues and form a scorecard of operational effectiveness.

**Covenant # 8:** A core truth is deeply embedded within the structure, policy and value system of all organizations which repeatedly generate poor safety performance, and it is: "People don't count, but every other number does!"

It is easier (more expensive, but easier) to neglect workplace health and safety than it is to manage it effectively. Line managers in under-performing organizations follow the Law of Least Resistance: "Given the opportunity to do nothing, most will." Excellence companies don't abide by this law!

**Covenant #9:** Achieving safety excellence is requisite upon measuring and managing the right things. Most organizations fail to effectively do either.

Measurement based solely on loss outcomes (i.e., accidents, injuries, claims and loss cost) is regressive practice, and impedes an organization's performance. Excellence requires measurement of all four performance parameters: (predictors, leading indicators, trailing metrics and results), and at all four levels of organizational responsibility: (executive, manager, supervisor and front-line).

**Covenant #10:** Safety must never be the responsibility of a staff function; safety must always be the obligation and key responsibility of line managers.

Excellence is achieved when an organization builds unified business systems in which safety is integrated into core operational processes; line and staff roles and responsibilities are effectively designed and aligned; and collaborative partnerships across the organization replace sub-optimizing, inter-functional competition. Eighty percent of work performance in an organization is shaped not by the written rules (the safety program developed by staff), but by the unwritten rules the consequence delivery system (actions or inactions) administered by line managers.

**Covenant #11:** Discipline, the most common performance management technique employed by managers, does not increase the level of safe employee behavior in a workplace. Only reinforcement, a far "used-less" management practice, does.

"Whack a Mole" sometimes produces winners at carnivals and state fairs, but is always sub-optimizing in the workplace. People strive to achieve higher levels of performance when they "wanna" are motivated to do so. When they are told they "gotta...or else," people divert the greater part of their energy away from being productive to one single objective getting even! And they generally will, without your having the slightest clue. If some morning your coffee tastes really strange, don't say I didn't warn you!

**Covenant #12:** Excellence is attainable NOW! Any organization can be a safety excellence organization; most however, will defer to 'L.A.M.E.' (Lethargic, Antiquated, Mediocre, Employee-focused) excuses and whine a lot!

Excellence requires two critical elements: knowledge and hard work. In safety, most organizations resist developing the first, and are unwilling to expend effort on the second. In business (and safety), there is no such thing as a quick fix. However, when strategy is sound, leadership is strong, resources are adequate and efforts are meaningful, there is great potential for rapid returns. Unfortunately, most organizations have an antiquated "No Returns" policy!

Of course, for those not willing to accept these covenants, make the necessary commitment or implement the transformational changes requisite to succeed, there are still a number of options available. Among the more common are:

- Increase the annual workers' compensation premium budget.
- Beef-up orientation and training expense to cover turnover.
- Add staff to the claim administration function.
- Increase the personnel department's recruitment budget.
- Hire more lawyers (my cousin is looking for work).
- Set higher production quotes to offset loss costs, and
- Lower the bar on profit margin projections!

Mediocrity, indeed, has its price!

*Larry Hansen, CSP, ARM*