

Improving Organizational Safety, A Corporate Approach

Colonel William D. Harrop III, U.S Marine Corps
Secretary of Defense Corporate Fellow
Southern Company/Georgia Power
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Introduction

In August of 2008, I was assigned to work for Georgia Power and its holding company, Southern Company, as part of the Secretary of Defense's Corporate Fellowship Program. The purpose of this program is to offer military officers an opportunity to observe corporate America's best business practices and bring them back to the Department of Defense. In my view, Southern Company's Target Zero-driven safety culture represents a best practice warranting closer examination.

As an investor owned super-regional energy in the Southeastern United States that includes four utility companies (Georgia Power, Alabama Power, Mississippi Power and Gulf Power), Southern Company is in the business of generating and delivering electricity to over 4 million customers.¹ The delivery of electricity is inherently dangerous work. In fact, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics' National Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries in 2007, electrical power-line installers and repairers is among the most dangerous occupations in the country with a fatality rate of 26.2 per 100,000 employed.²

From the moment I passed through the door at Georgia Power I took notice of the widespread presence of safety messaging as well as the name of their safety program – Target Zero. I turned on my computer and the wallpaper was the Target Zero logo. My first meeting came a few days later and I was impressed by the safety briefing that began the proceedings, and every one thereafter. I spent time with front-line supervisors in the field and observed the safety "circle-walk" around their vehicles and job-site briefs. I saw

too the regular briefing of safety statistics and was impressed by the long term across the board reductions in incidents. Safety is indeed the first priority in Southern Company and the positive outcomes of this corporate culture are evidence of its effectiveness. How did this come to be? What were the principles underlying the creation and sustainment of a culture of safety? What lessons could be drawn that could possibly have applicability to the Marine Corps?

Background

In 2003 Georgia Power's sister company, Alabama Power, recorded its second best year in safety performance. But this was not a record from which one could gain even a small measure of satisfaction because it represented 185 Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) recordable employee injuries, including four admitted to the University of Alabama Birmingham Hospital Burn Center in a thirty-one day period.³ This performance, although good by historical measures, was in the bottom quartile of the Southeastern Electric Exchange's ranking of member companies but more importantly was deeply concerning to a company that truly values its employees.⁴ As Alabama Power's management team examined the root causes of this poor performance, they concluded that their employees consistently violated basic rules and there was little or no accountability for such actions. As a result the Central Safety Committee established a new safety strategy for the next year called "Target Zero."

Target Zero was different from previous approaches in that it set a goal of zero

accidents and injuries, as opposed to focusing on a mere reduction of the same. The

implication of the latter being that a certain number of accidents is acceptable. Target

Zero on the other hand is an approach emphasizing that every injury or accident is

preventable and therefore zero accidents is the only logical goal. Similarly, as opposed to

valuing the number of days since an accident, Target Zero emphasizes the number of

days without an accident; a subtle but powerful difference. A comprehensive

communication plan was developed to support implementation that included, first and

foremost, a powerful brand – the “Target Zero” logo and associated color scheme, talking

points for management to ensure consistent messaging, support material (posters and

articles) to reinforce the message and the implementation of supervisor safety meetings.

From this point on safety would be summed up as, “every day, every job, safely” and the

only acceptable safety objective is to have an injury free workplace.

The plan paid off. By the end of 2004 Alabama Power reduced OSHA recordable

injuries by 32%, lost work time injuries by 29% and rose from the bottom quartile of

Southeastern Electric Exchange’s ranking of member companies to the second quartile,

an impressive accomplishment.⁵ Results like these did not go unnoticed. Mr. David

Ratcliffe, the recently installed Southern Company Chief Executive Officer, decided to

adopt the Target Zero philosophy across Southern Company.

Adopting Target Zero across the entire Southern Company allowed the resources

of a company with a market capitalization of over twenty billion dollars to be applied.



is depicted in the Alabama Power graphic below:

The revised Southern Company Target Zero model, called the "Safety Pyramid",

Building upon Alabama Power's strategy, Southern Company added improvements to the Alabama model such as linking safety performance to incentive pay, close call reporting, safety statistic reporting, and periodic review and the establishment of a central safety committee, a safety and health toolbox, recognition program, driving safety and the idea that each employee is his or her brother's or sister's keeper. Ratcliffe's decision paid off. By the end of 2005 OSHA recordables and lost time injuries were reduced again.

Since 2006 the numbers have continued to get even better. The answer to the question, "How did this come to be?" is, I believe, quite simple. Fundamentally, and not surprisingly, it started at the top of the organization with good leadership and followed a basic but effective formula upon which the foundation of the program was built and continuously expanded. Southern Company also developed a simple brand to accompany the easily understood and an effective communication strategy for persistent and consistent message delivery. Moreover, the Target Zero message was delivered to and acted upon by every corner of the company, regardless of the inherent dangerousness of the work. And finally, results were incentivized.

A natural leader, David Ratcliffe said it best when asked why he thought Target Zero was so powerful. He said, "Target Zero is powerful because the message is clear, driven home regularly and the people understand the message." A caring leader, David Ratcliffe ascribes to the servant approach to leadership and is always fascinated by what he doesn't know, which drives his desire for continuous learning. This combination makes him an extremely effective communicator because he is a caring listener. The Target Zero-driven culture of safety is communicated from the top.

The second reason for success is the foundation upon which the program is based. Summed up by Don Gaddy, the Safety and Health Director at Southern Company Generation, and an experienced safety professional who said, Target Zero is effective

because there is "visible management involvement; employee participation, which leads to engagement and ownership; and clearly defined expectations and accountability." My experience has been that every business unit leader at every level models good safety behavior, which ensures the necessary moral authority to hold employees accountable. Employee participation in safety endeavors across Southern Company is valued and rewarded. Lastly, safety is a component of every employees' annual performance plan and appraisal.

Lessons

Not surprisingly, strong leadership and a simple but aggressively executed plan are keys to improving organizational safety, something that is a strength of our Corps. It has been my observation that many of the Target Zero principles can be found in Marine Corps safety programs. However, using Southern Company's Target Zero program as a model there are some best practices the Marine Corps should consider adopting in order to improve safety. Specifically,

- The Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps should no longer be the Marine Corps' Safety Officer. In order to put the correct amount of emphasis on safety, only the Commandant should be the Marine Corps' Safety Officer

- Consider adding safety as an attribute on the fitness report. In this way you not only incentivize safety, you also add an additional measure of accountability.
 - Take a more comprehensive approach to safety by taking the safety fight to every corner of the Corps, including our office spaces. A good start would be to require simple safety briefs before the beginning of every meeting.
 - Develop a unique and professional brand for all things safety in the Marine Corps. Safety material and messaging must stand out as a unique and separate from rest of the din that adorns the bulkheads of our buildings.
 - Take better advantage of technology to communicate safety messaging in a more dynamic and timely manner. For example, safety videos from leadership could be delivered via a link in an email to every member of the unit rather than by antiquated message traffic.
- One of the many things I learned this year that we Marines do many things exceptionally well, including safety, but we can always be better. Adopting best practices from an industry leader in safety is a start and we have nothing to lose.