



Peter Bateman

Don Eckenfelder: what keeps him going is the look on people's faces when he talks about enriching safety culture.

THE SAFEGUARD INTERVIEW

Safety's cultural ambassador

Don Eckenfelder has left behind a conventional 30-year career in safety management to become an evangelist for safety culture change.

JACKIE BROWN-HAYSOM finds out why.

IT IS NO SURPRISE TO FIND THAT AMERICAN SAFETY exponent *Don Eckenfelder* is a man with deep religious roots.

It takes more than a touch of missionary zeal to make a successful health and safety consultant devote years of his life to a "financially disastrous" crusade, promoting a fresh approach to workplace safety, just because he believes it will help people.

"I feel I'm sort of a messenger for this stuff and it's going to do some people some good somewhere," he says. "In the beginning I thought in six to 12 months this would be the hottest thing in the world, but I've spent four years on it now, earning little or no income, because I'm committed to the idea.

"I've gotten to the point where I don't care whether I'm the ultimate benefactor or not. What keeps me going is the look on people's faces when I talk to them about it."

Back home in up-state New York, Eckenfelder is a bishop in the Mormon church. He makes no secret of where he's coming from - religious allusions drop easily into his conversation, and there is a Biblical quote in his Powerpoint presentation - but values-driven safety is the only philosophy he's pushing, and he has taken pains to make his programme accessible to those of any, or no, religious persuasion.

"This is about values and beliefs, but I didn't want anything in it that could stigmatise the message by relating it to any particular dogma, so I read some books on comparative religion and examined the social and doctrinal teachings of the world's 12 major religions.

"I found the doctrines varied, but the social teachings were exactly the same - things like honesty, chastity, fidelity, integrity, constancy and the importance of family. Values-driven safety builds on the teachings of all these great religions, as well as the beliefs of all right-thinking people, whether or not they subscribe to a particular doctrine."

CHANGE IN CAREER DIRECTION

Eckenfelder was some thirty years into a distinguished oh&s career when he identified the relationship between values and safety. As a chemical engineer, he had worked in health and safety with a number of US corporations, served as president of both the *American Society of Safety Engineers* and the *American Society of Safety Research* and was the youngest person to be made a Fellow of the ASSE. But the dawning realisation that conventional approaches could neither explain nor prevent some accidents sent him searching for new answers.

"I realised that to a large degree I hadn't been all that successful. Accidents seemed to keep happening, and I didn't seem to get why. Then, about four or five years ago I stumbled over what I think is the truth and decided at that point I was going to delve into this area for as long as I lived because I thought it was something that could produce real change."

This discovery was that an organisation's culture - its core beliefs and values - determines staff attitudes and behaviour, which in turn determines their performance. The only way for a workplace to enjoy lasting safety benefits is by changing its culture.

"In the past I was puzzled to find companies that had all the manuals and procedures and documents but still didn't perform well, and other companies that didn't have any of these things but were able to achieve excellence.

"The fact is that employee attitudes have more to do with safety performance than any other single factor, but it is the safety culture of the organisation that determines these attitudes.



Don Eckenfelder speaking about culture change at ACC Worksafe Expo 2001.

"This culture is too important to be allowed to simply evolve. It should be designed and shaped, and I've developed ways to help people do this."

EXPERT BY DEFAULT

The values-driven safety package draws on Eckenfelder's accumulated oh&s experience, but the catalyst that brought it together came from a series of fortunate coincidences.

"As a safety engineer I always tried to listen to what was going on around me. A few years ago I heard a lot of people talking about values. I asked myself how this related to what I was doing, and started talking to people to try to find out."

When a friend called soon afterwards, asking him to speak about values and safety at a national conference, he was taken aback.

"He told me I seemed to be the expert because I was always talking about it, but that was because I didn't know anything and was trying to find somebody who did."

He agreed to the presentation anyway, and

**"I'M AN AMATEUR APPLIED SOCIAL SCIENTIST TRAPPED IN THE BODY OF A SAFETY ENGINEER."
DON ECKENFELDER**

began reading up on the subject. A few weeks later a publisher who spotted his name in the conference programme invited him to write a book on the topic, and Eckenfelder embarked on some serious research.

"As I got more involved in the process I began to feel that what I was dealing with was the Holy Grail of safety. For years I had been dealing with the symptoms - the accidents and accident reports - but I realised that, if we go back to the root cause of almost any accident, the real problem is attitudinal.

"If we think safety is a technology problem, or a regulatory problem, or a behavioural problem, we are never going to solve it. We have to address it as a social or cultural issue, and that is what values-driven safety does."

TO MEASURE IS TO CHANGE

Working from a simple line diagram which showed the cause and effect relationship between culture, behaviour and safety outcomes, Eckenfelder began searching for a means of measuring workplace culture and changing it for the better.

"I came up with what I call a culture barometer because, like a weather barometer, this predicts whether your overall safety performance is going to get better or worse.

"It is generic and can be applied to any industry, but the really good thing about it is that the process *is* the product. By measuring, managing and realising the importance of culture as you create your own barometer, you are going to change attitudes."

The programme's success requires a commitment to safety that goes far beyond lip service, however.

"It's got to be something deep within your gut - something you feel very deeply. You need leaders who are passionate about the subject and committed to doing safety for the right reason - because they care about their employees."

NO CONFLICT WITH BUSINESS GOALS

This humanitarian ethos does not mean that the programme is out of touch with business reality. Eckenfelder says even the most cynical CEO can be convinced that it makes good business sense.

"It doesn't cost a whole lot to implement,

and once attitudes are right the behaviours look after themselves. That saves money, because when people incur injuries it seriously affects the bottom line.

"If a CEO is only interested in stockholder dividends and increasing stockholder equity, as he or she probably should be, you have to appeal to their self-interest. Get them to realise that their profitability is tied to the performance of their employees, and the performance of their employees is tied to the way they are treated.

"Once they begin to see that good safety is good business, it all gets real simple and the culture will change."

AN OVERUSE EXAMPLE

At *Chesebrough-Ponds* Eckenfelder had first-hand experience of winning over a sceptical CEO when he was summoned to the boss's office during his Christmas vacation to find solutions to an escalating workers' compensation bill for overuse injuries.

"Our compo payouts had gone from \$3 million to \$13 million in a couple of years and were projected to be \$18 million in the next year. The CEO thought the answers lay in changing the rules, but I pointed out that if we didn't have any injuries, the rules wouldn't apply to us, so instead of changing them we should stop having incidents."

Over six months he won his boss's full support for a new approach to safety, and saw the culture of the whole organisation undergo rapid change.

"I didn't do that alone. I did that by going over all the plants, finding champions, enlisting people. There were hundreds of people involved.

"In the past we had tried all kinds of ergonomic solutions, but they hadn't worked. We tried to get the employees to do exercises, but they wouldn't.

"What worked was changing the culture. We educated them so they came to see that these exercises were in their self-interest, and did them voluntarily. Then the middle managers who had thought the people were all malingers realised most of the problems were real and started to take them seriously.

"In the end it had quite a lot to do with plain old dollars because the self-interest of most senior people is to create profit, but it worked and everyone benefited."

One of the best attributes of values-driven safety, Eckenfelder says, is that it is self-perpetuating.

"With most of the other things you can do in safety, when you go away, they go away. But if you change the culture, it sticks

"Not only that, but with most other programmes, if you don't do the whole thing

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it's a big failure. It just doesn't work.

"The neat thing about the culture change process is that everything you do is a gain. If you move your culture in the right direction, even a little bit, you'll get better."

BEHAVIOURISM A BLIND ALLEY

Behaviour-based safety, an approach that has had widespread acceptance in the United States, comes in for harsh criticism, however. An early supporter, Eckenfelder has changed his mind.

"We have become obsessed with it in the

US, but it has some really serious negative aspects. It is not enduring, it is manipulative, and it runs counter to management best thinking."

The foundation of behaviour-based safety, he says, is the command and control management model of the 1950s and 60s, an approach which does not sit well with the concepts of empowerment and self-correction favoured by today's top performing companies.

"BBS is about watching people, keeping score on them, looking over their shoulders. It's expensive to install, expensive to maintain and, probably worst of all, when you stop doing it the people go right back to what they were doing before.

"It's a bit like having children - if you can win them over to your way of thinking you're far more likely to have enjoyable results than if you just watch them all the time."

FROM SAFETY TO SOCIAL SCIENCE

Parenting is another area where Eckenfelder has had plenty of experience and he admits his family - four adult children and 15 grandchildren - along with his ecclesiastical leadership, have transformed him from a chemical engineer to what he now describes as an "amateur applied social scientist trapped in the body of a safety engineer." Since completing his book, *Values-Driven Safety*, published in 1996, he has continued to explore the potential of the cultural change model, and now believes it has applications for more than just business problems.

"After watching people around me experience pleasure, joy, terror, unhappiness, problems and what have you, I've come to the realisation that, in life as in safety, what we believe and value predicts our performance, both individually and collectively.

"Tell me what somebody believes and I'll tell you where they're going to end up, and the same is true in business. The basic tenets behind values-driven safety apply just as much to the pursuit of business excellence."

A SOLUTION FOR WIDER PROBLEMS?

Even world conflicts, he suggests, would be easier to resolve if they were regarded not as religious or political or territorial problems but as cultural ones.

He tells of the man in Maine who, for some years now, has each year brought together fifty or a hundred Israeli and Palestinian children and put them in a camp. At the beginning the two groups don't want to be on the same bus or sleep in the same bunk rooms, but by the time they go home after eight weeks they've become friends and think the things their people are doing to one another are terrible.

"Obviously we can't take every Israeli and every Palestinian and bring them to camp in Maine, but it is an exercise in cultural change, and it shows what can be done."

If Eckenfelder is a visionary, he is also a pragmatist.

"Sometimes I ask my wife: Why me? Why now? Why hasn't somebody else come up with these ideas that are not just safety-changing, but possibly world-changing?

"I believe they will make for safer, better workplaces and I'll do whatever I can to make them happen. I hope they will end up doing a lot of people a lot of good, but even if they don't, I'm still having fun doing it." ■

Safeguard is bringing Don Eckenfelder back to New Zealand in late January/early February 2002 to run seminars on measuring and enriching your safety culture. Visit www.safeguard.co.nz for details. Don may be reached at deckenfelder@yahoo.com, and his book *Values-Driven Safety* may be ordered from www.govinst.com