Values-Driven Safety

Values-Driven Safety: Re-engineering Loss Prevention using Value-inspired Resource Optimization.

by Donald J. Eckenfelder. Published 1996 by Government Institutes Inc, Maryland USA, ph (1) (301) 921 2355. Hardcover, 380pp. ISBN: 0-86587-532-4 $US59 + postage.

THIS BOOK, THE source of the story *It's the Culture, Stupid* on page 18, sets out what author Don Eckenfelder claims is a new approach to attaining excellence in health and safety, in which people's core beliefs and values can play the central role in avoiding unpleasant outcomes.

Former president and Fellow of the American Society of Safety Engineers, and former president of the American Society of Safety Research, Eckenfelder's 30-plus years of loss prevention experience make him a heavyweight in the US safety world.

He is not modest about his idea, which he calls Value-Inspired Resource Optimization, or VIRO. "I believe that I have stumbled upon a very powerful concept," he writes in the preface, "that has the potential to elevate the way workplace safety and health is handled throughout the world
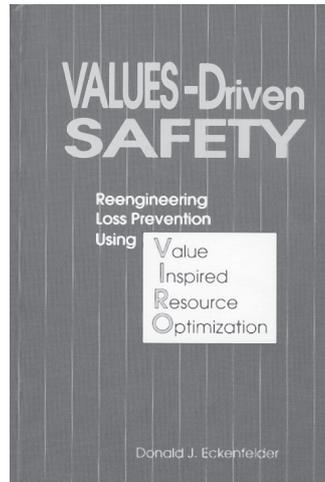
and to provide side benefits that, if recognized and applied, could shed new light on the the safety profession and literally change the way the world works."

The chuckles of the cynics are likely to be silenced, however, by the sincerity and dedication with which he explains his premises: that people are governed by social laws as well as scientific and human laws; that absolute truth exists; that beliefs and values predict outcomes; that beliefs can be influenced and values taught; and that it is better and easier to shape outcomes early in the piece than at the last minute.

Eckenfelder is an unashamed moral conservative who is active in his religious belief, traits which

inform much of the commentary and anecdotes littering the text. However, the religous aspect is nowhere explicit, and your agnostic reviewer feels his claim - that people of any religion or none could happily use VIRO - to be fair.

He critiques what he calls traditional safety programmes, and has few kind words to say about OSHA's regulatory compliance approach. The newer, behaviour-based safety programmes receive kinder treatment: "This is the best idea that safety has seen in the last thirty years and perhaps since we first decided that injuries were preventable." Nevertheless, he goes on to list several key defects of the behavioural approach. He emphasises, however, that VIRO is intended to supplement existing programmes, not replace them.

How does the safety leader gain the trust of management and seek to influence it? Not by whining about compliance, says Eckenfelder: "Loss prevention to comply with regulations rarely gets management support, at least not without dragging them into the process screaming and yelling. Those who champion compliance will always be viewed with a jaundiced eye and may even be seen as pariahs in the

business community."

Using the promise of lower costs to drive safety doesn't work in the end either, he says, though he concedes disarmingly that he has used it successfully in the past. His VIRO method boils down to establishing what a company's core values are and acting on them every time. In other words, you take action on safety and health because it's the right thing to do, not because it might save you money in the long term, and not because it will keep you out of trouble with government inspectors.

The section of the book dealing with the VIRO Maturity Grid (reproduced on page 20) will strike a chord with many readers, who can use it to measure and keep track of their own organisation's progress.

A curious mix of humility and unrestrained trumpet-blowing, of cheesy homily and telling point, Eckenfelder is guaranteed to inspire as many health and safety people as he infuriates. But set asides differences in cultural norms for a moment and there's lots here to ponder.

If John-Boy Walton had been a health and safety professional, this is the book he would have written.

Reviewed by Peter Bateman ∎