

OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH & SAFETY ISSUES

LOSS CONTROL 5 STAR PROGRAM

Many workers in the manufacturing industry, hospitality industry, health care industry and retail industry work on their feet for more than half their shift.

The 5 Star system of loss control rests on the theory that control of loss is a management function. Its premise is that safety should be the responsibility of line management and that loss control co-coordinators should ensure that management is complying with standards and taking action before loss occurs. It relies heavily on management reportage.

There are a number of problems with the 5 Star system. Because its premise is loss control, it seeks to reduce losses of all kinds, losses of productivity, losses in absenteeism, losses of machinery and equipment, losses in quality of goods produced, and losses of efficiency. Losses to workers through injury or disease are incidental. The 5 Star system does not treat workers as people, but rather as objects, as costs of production. Some 5 Star job analyses have resulted in job loss a production is “rationalized” rather than made safer.

Since the program reflects property loss and other immediate losses, it emphasizes safety but largely ignores occupational hygiene and occupational health concerns. Since industrial diseases usually do not show up for years after exposure, there is no immediate payoff in their prevention. Thus the 5 Star program disregards these problems.

The program emphasizes employees’ “attitudes” which assumes that worker carelessness is the root cause of accidents. This is a negative, “blame the victim” approach. It ignores the fundamental design problems in the workplace, work station, or work tools that are responsible for most accidents. As well it ignores issues of the pressure for production that persuade workers to take chances. Rather than reduce the pace of production, workers are blamed if they get hurt.

The 5 Star program is usually accompanied by a safety award program. Safety award programs assume that injured workers are responsible for their own misfortune; if they were more careful, they would not hurt themselves.

These programs provide an incentive for workers not to report accidents, especially lost time accidents. When injury statistics are hidden, companies’ WCB costs are reduced and the chance of higher 5 Star rating is increased.

The five star rating system has been widely used in South Africa. In the mining industry in particular there is a marked contrast between the theory and the reality. Since the introduction of the five star system in South Africa, the reportable accident rate was halved but the fatality rate remained constant. Workers can be bribed or threatened not to report accidents but a death cannot be hidden.

The Hlobane Coal mine in South Africa had a four star rating in 1983. On September 12, 1983, 68 miners

were killed by a methane gas explosion. The joint inquest and inquiry into the tragedy and the court convictions found numerous health and safety violations including the company's failure to provide: flameproof electrical machines, adequate ventilation to prevent the build up of methane gas; and sufficient methane gas testing devices as well as altering records of the presence of methane gas.

Closer to home, the five star system has proved just as suspect. In New Brunswick in 1989 the Denison Potash Co. received a gold star from International Loss Control Institute (the gold star is even higher than a five star award). 5 Star obviously ignored the fact the New Brunswick mine had seven work-related fatalities in the previous four years.

Since joint worker-management health and safety committees are not legally required in the United States, they play no part in the U.S. 5 Star system. Some Canadian employers, however, who are sophisticated in their attempts to co-opt workers, are eager to have the joint committees assist them in implementing the 5 Star Program. Most CAW locals have rejected this, telling employers that management can run their own program while the union through the joint committee pursues its own health and safety priorities. Other locals have chosen to use part of the 5 Star audits as part of their regular workplace inspection, while rejecting the production oriented, anti-worker bias of the rest of the five star system.

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