



Gary C. Vaughn

Creating a safety culture

Creating a culture that promotes individual safety and eliminates injuries is not an easy thing to do in the railroad industry.

Railroads historically are militaristic in nature, defining rules of all categories to the extreme, in part due to federal regulatory mandates. Historically railroads have treated their team members (employees) with that same militaristic attitude. In my 40-plus years in the industry, “us against them” was made abundantly clear. There was never a time early in my career that I didn’t know of a large fence built between management and team members. Sometimes that fence was built of stone, other times of soft mud, but the fence was always there and everyone on both sides knew it. This forced undesired confrontation, and created the “management by intimidation” method of railroading since the days of the Civil War.

The best-case scenario to establish a safety culture is to have all team members obey rules because it’s the right thing to do and *not* because of fear of management retribution. However, with high turnover rates in the industry and new generations that will change jobs five-to-seven times in their career, this is a most difficult task. When the fence between management and workforce is firmly in place, the task is nearly impossible.

You’ll note I have used the phrase “team members” several times here. More often than not in the short line industry, the phrase “team member” and “family” have the same meaning. Short line railroaders know that in order to be competitive we have to railroad smarter, more efficiently, more innovatively, and cheaper than do the Class I’s. To be successful, we have to work as a team or a family. We simply cannot afford to build those fences, or we could not survive as a short line.

In our industry, we may spend more time on the job and away from home than we do with our own blood family. When those fences are built between management and workforce, we spend most of our lives on the job in the adversarial mode. When we, as managers, work to tear down that fence, we have created the “railroad family” where we look out for each other, and what happens to any team member affects us all, just as it does in our blood families. The change in outlook is dramatic and the start of a safety culture.

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When a team member is injured, disabled, or killed on the job, there are two groups affected for months, years, and generations to come: the blood family and the railroad family. Behind every team member are their families: wives, husbands, children, mothers, or fathers. Our treatment of those team members should always have those blood family members in mind. What affects our team members affects their families—railroad and blood. Fatalities are permanent and can’t be fixed; we can only react to them. Preventing the fatality by creating a safety culture where we look out and care for each other as we do in any family is the answer.

How many times have we held a door open for a perfect stranger? Do we treat our own families (both railroad and blood) with the same courtesy? We spend more time with our railroad families than we do with our blood families, yet we tend to treat them differently. We constantly watch out for our children so they do not come to harm, but do we watch out for our team members the same way? Why not? We spend as much time or more with our team members—why would we treat them differently? Yet we do. A team member does not cease to be a human being because of a rules infraction, yet we often treat him as such. A rules or policy violation may be treated differently (due to severity) *after* the fact, but shouldn’t be during the initial confrontation with the team member. As managers we sometimes tend to “over-react” to an incident due to our experience levels. Seeing a team member slide his body between the knuckles of two cars to get to the other side will sometimes send us screaming at that person because as experienced railroaders, we have seen the results of such an act. But without that experienced life-changing event, that team member may have no concept of the consequences. Our job is to mentor this new team member and train him in a manner that is conducive to learning. Screaming just doesn’t work. Management by intimidation doesn’t work.

Common respect, treatment with dignity, caring and looking out for each other—those are the keys to creating a successful safety culture. Short line railroaders are learning and are leading the way—how about you?

Gary C. Vaughn, Senior Vice President of Safety & Environmental Health, WATCO Companies, LLC, is ASLRRRA’s first Safety Professional of the Year.