



CASE STUDY

LEADING WITH SAFETY AT COLUMBIA FOREST PRODUCTS

Situation

Columbia Forest Products is a five decades old employee-owned company with 18 manufacturing locations in the United States and Canada. It is North America’s largest manufacturer of hardwood plywood and hardwood veneer products. Through its subsidiary Columbia Flooring, it is also the leading producer of hardwood and laminate flooring.

In 2004 the company embarked on a new venture; pioneering an all-employee safety approach in the plywood division’s nine sites, covering 2,800 employees. HR manager Don Carter and plywood president Brad Thompson recognized an opportunity to both strengthen the company’s position within its industry and create a platform for motivation and engagement: safety performance. While each of the division’s nine sites were already actively managing safety through traditional compliance practices, the methods – and results – varied widely by location.

At the crux of the problem, a lack of consistent practices meant there were no standardized indicators by which the division could effectively manage safety efforts. Columbia, like many organizations, relied largely on outcomes, such as incident rates and workers’ compensation costs, to steer the company’s efforts. Recognizing an opportunity, Thompson and Carter suggested a progressive solution; why not run safety like any other critical business objective?

Columbia enlisted help from BST to design a safety practice that resembled the processes the company relied on for other business functions. In addition to providing a steady stream of safety indicators the division could act on upstream, the company wanted the approach to include clear roles and responsibilities for leaders from the supervisor up to the division staff. The goal – create a sustainable safety process while also fostering a culture where safety leads performance in other areas.

Solution

BST proposed a multi-tiered approach. At the heart of the initiative would be implementation of Behavioral Accident Prevention Process® (BAPP®) technology at the individual mills. The BAPP initiatives would serve to engage mill employees in systematically identifying, measuring, and reducing exposures at the working interface, where employees interact with technology and systems. These efforts would also serve as a common focus for the division and provide a standard measure and vocabulary for safety performance.

Just as important would be targeted leadership development activities designed to support both the mill-level BAPP initiatives and foster the safety climate and organizational culture across the division that Columbia

At a Glance:

- Columbia Forest Products is a 49-year old employee-owned company with 18 manufacturing locations in the United States and Canada. It is North America's largest manufacturer of hardwood plywood and hardwood veneer products.
- Inconsistent practices and a lack of standardized indicators had made it difficult to manage safety efforts across the division.
- In 2004 the company launched a multi-tiered approach to safety improvement that included both employee and leadership engagement.
- Injury rates have dropped 27% across the division.
- Injury severity has dropped a staggering 81%.

was striving for. At the division level, the company's senior leaders would participate in workshops and individual coaching. Senior leaders at the mill-level would also participate in a leadership assessment and improvement activities designed to enhance their ability to support the company's safety goals and provide better leadership generally. Finally, mill supervisors would receive their own development training aimed at strengthening their skills for supporting the safety improvement process.

Columbia leaders saw the strategy as helping them provide a foundation for accountability and engagement as well. To begin the project, BST administered the Organizational Culture Diagnostic Instrument (OCDI) to determine the strengths and areas of improvement in the local culture.

The culture diagnostic raised issues surrounding the perceived commitment of the division's leaders for safety. To help CFP leaders leverage their influence on safety, and make their commitment a felt presence, BST consultants designed a development strategy that involved individual diagnostics, one-on-one coaching, and continual alignment for the division's leaders.

Senior leaders first underwent a 360° diagnostic instrument that asked peers, reports, and the leaders themselves how often, and well, they used identified best practices for safety leadership. The results guided the development of personal action plans that defined specific behaviors each leader could employ in their day-to-day jobs to support safety performance.

With the leadership component in place, the company launched the employee-driven portion of its safety strategy, with BAPP implementations at the mill-level. Each mill recruited hourly employees to form a steering team and work with a BST consultant to identify behaviors critical to safe work at the mill. The teams were then trained on how to observe, collect data on, and analyze these behaviors.

Since one of the key objectives of the safety initiative was creating a uniform safety management practice throughout the division, Columbia Forest Product leaders worked with BST to develop a system for managing critical process metrics. Each mill now completes a safety dashboard with indicators of how the employee-driven safety process is functioning; among the measures the company tracks are levels of observation activity, barrier patterns, and participation rates.

In order to support another key objective for CFP, leveraging safety performance for a more unified and higher-performing culture, division leaders created a series of intersection points for safety activities among the division's nine sites as well as at division headquarters.

Results

Since launching the safety initiative in 2004, the company has realized a 27% reduction in in-jury rates across the division, with many sites experiencing more dramatic improvements. The severity of injuries across the division has dropped a staggering 81%. Additionally, the principles learned in the employee-driven safety process are being leveraged for a division-wide quality initiative and communication among all employees has increased significantly. While the company continues to refine its safety approach, Carter says that the initiative has already helped the company align itself around its core principles. "Our employees are our most important asset. How you can