



THE CHALLENGE BEGINS

“Manager of safety.”

Kurt Bradshaw liked the sound of his new position and repeated it as he dialed the phone to share the news with his wife, Jessica.

“I’m so proud of you, Kurt. This calls for a celebration.”

“We can also celebrate the raise that comes with the title.”

“More money? Even better.”

“I’m on the way to a meeting with my new boss now, but I’ll see you at 6:00.”

Sitting in senior vice president of operations Ron Kaiser’s office, Kurt’s new responsibilities became instantly more challenging as the man across the desk ticked off his expectations.

“We’ve got to turn things around,” Kaiser was saying. “The new policies and procedures we put into place six months ago aren’t

working. We had two fatalities last month in the western area, four Lost Time Accidents in the distribution group and who knows what we never hear about. Our claims cost ... not to mention our lost productivity ... has the attention of our board of directors, shareholders, and regulators.

“Bottom line, Bradshaw, we’ve tried everything and nothing seems to work, including the zero tolerance program we initiated last year. So, we need change and we need it fast. We think you’re the man for the job.

“You can start with the western service area,” Kaiser said, pointing to the map behind his desk. “Their numbers are high, so it will be our test region for whatever changes you decide to make ... oh, and we want results in 120 days. Then, with any luck at all, we won’t have the accidents we’re having now.”

“That deadline doesn’t give me much time,” Kurt countered.

“That’s true, but our reputation in the industry is starting to suffer. We need results.” Kaiser’s tone let the new manager of safety know there was no room for discussion.

Back in his office, and after dealing with a steady stream of well wishers, Kurt decided to call John Sullivan, his co-worker and friend from the western service area.

John and Kurt had become close over the past few years, close enough for their families to spend time together last year when John came to the corporate office for the company’s annual meeting.

John had begun his career at the bottom of the ladder and had progressed upward, much the same way Kurt had done.

“Couldn’t have picked a better man, my friend.” John sounded

genuinely happy to hear Kurt's news. "We'll still be working together. That's the main thing."

"But manager of safety ... it's a huge job ... and our numbers aren't impressive," Kurt responded. "Bill Andrews worked hard, putting new policies and procedures in place, but our incident severity and frequency rates continue to rise, which – no doubt – was the reason they made a change ... and Kaiser made it clear, he wants results, so I may be the proverbial lamb on my way to the slaughter."

"Never let 'em see you sweat. Besides, you're up to the challenge."



John's words echoed as Kurt opened the door after dinner that evening. "After you, ladies."

"Don't think I'll eat again until Thursday," Jessica declared.

"Me, too ... but I'm going up now ... still have homework." His daughter Shannon stood on tiptoe to kiss her dad. "Thanks for dinner, you're the best," she whispered before dancing up the stairs.

At 2 a.m., Kurt had yet to close his eyes, thinking of the job ahead of him. "I know operations. I've proven that," he thought to himself, "but safety ... what do I know about safety? It's an entirely different world than operations."

Besides all the policies and procedures in place, the company has invested millions to upgrade the equipment – with little improvement. What about the program, "Safety is our Number One Priority!" Everyone seemed fired up, but then the momentum tapered off, safety disappeared from individual radar screens and the number of fatalities and injuries kept climbing. What is missing ...?

The next morning at breakfast, Jessica poured their second cups of coffee and brushed Kurt's cheek with a kiss. "You look tired."

"Didn't sleep much. Kept thinking about Kaiser's deadline and trying to remember as much as I could about what has been done in the past. Jess, I'm not sure I'm the right guy for this job," Kurt admitted. "I don't have a background in safety and I have no idea how to stop all the accidents. What do I really bring to the table?"

"Kurt Bradshaw! Are you saying you aren't the best man for the job?"

"No. It's just that I've had a chance to think about what Kaiser expects – and it's a tall order ... maybe darn near impossible," Kurt said. "You know the old phrase, 'Over-commit and under-deliver?' I'm just wondering if I've over-committed by saying I would take the job."

Kurt's wife listened in silence.

"Just look at what they're expecting."

"But remember how much operations improved when you became area operations manager? Your team would follow you anywhere. How were you able to do that?" asked Jessica.

"I always worked with good people," Kurt countered.

"Your leadership skills, your ability to talk with anyone on the team and provide feedback, your obvious caring for each person and helping them make the most of their opportunities," his wife continued.

"That's what set you apart. That's why management thought you'd be a good manager of safety."

Kurt finished his toast and the last swallows of his coffee as he remembered some of his past achievements.

Now it was Jessica's turn to sip her coffee thoughtfully before she looked up. "Maybe you're just being modest," she suggested, "but, if you're feeling unsure about the whole proposition, what about some help? Remember Dad's old friend, Sam Rollins?"

Kurt remembered the name. Sam Rollins had been honored at an industry seminar. "Yeah, I saw him get a safety award a while back. Really impressive background. He's been around long enough to know this industry inside and out."

"Dad thinks so highly of him. He might be a good sounding board."

"At least he might give me some ideas about where to start," Kurt's mood brightened at the idea. "I'll call him and see if he has time to meet."

As Kurt kissed his wife goodbye, Jessica tucked a slip of paper into his coat pocket. "While you were dressing, I called Dad and got Sam Rollins' number."

"What would I do without you?" Kurt asked between hugs. "See you tonight."

"Good luck, Mr. Safety Manager," Jessica called behind him.



"Sam Rollins," a deep, gravelly voice answered Kurt's call.

"Mr. Rollins, my name is Kurt Bradshaw. My father-in-law, Hal Rankin, gave me your number."

Explaining the turn of events leading to his call, Kurt was pleased Sam was available the next day.

“Why don’t you come to my house tomorrow evening at 6:00 p.m.,” Sam suggested.



“Ten minutes ahead of schedule.” Kurt turned off the car and picking up his computer bag, walked across the front porch and pressed the doorbell.

Sam answered the door with a wide smile and a generous handshake. “Welcome, Kurt. I’m glad you took me up on my offer to meet here. Come in, come in. Make yourself at home and I’ll get us some coffee.”

The foyer was impressive, decorated with plaques and several shelves of photos. Kurt noticed one photo of Sam standing among what appeared to be a crew on a transmission right-of-way. Another showed Sam and two people who could be his wife and son. The last photo was a much younger Sam in a military uniform, standing with several other soldiers.

In a few minutes, Sam reappeared, carrying two mugs of coffee. “Follow me. The front porch is comfortable this time of day.”

After the usual pleasantries, Kurt got right to the point of his visit. “Sam, I’ve been in this business for over 10 years, but this is the first time I’ve had the deadlines and responsibilities for safety I have now,” he began. “To be honest, I’m looking for some help on where to begin.”

Sam stroked his mustache before he answered, his eyes focusing on an invisible scene in the distance. Then his gaze returned to Kurt. “There’s no doubt. You have a big job ahead of you, but it isn’t an impossible task.

“In a nutshell, your job is to create a strong safety culture for your organization, which means a lifestyle and belief system for everyone who works there now and in the future, because a *culture* is made up of group behaviors and beliefs that are transmitted from one generation to the next,” Sam explained.

“One of the biggest challenges you’ll have in improving the culture that already exists is dealing with human nature and *old school* behavior – but, as a manager, I’m sure you’ve already had a taste of that.”

Kurt agreed, eager to hear more.

“In your business – in any business – you’ll find there are things people do, day in and day out, that put them or someone else at risk. I call these *at-risk behaviors*, and they are the root cause of most incidents. They are also the foundation for what I call the safety pyramid,” Sam explained.



Looking at the pyramid Sam had drawn, Kurt asked, “Why do you say *incident* instead of *accident*, and don’t most organizations use the term *near miss* instead of *near hit*?”

“You’re very observant,” Sam replied. “But, no, I use the word *incident* because *accident* implies something happened outside of someone’s

control, which is not the case 97 percent of the time. And, when you think about it, what's the difference between a near miss and a near hit? So why do we call it a near *miss*? Typically we use words like *accident* and *near miss* to lessen accountability or minimize the potential consequence. That's literally like whistling by the graveyard," Sam sighed.

"Getting back to that old school mindset – like having to prove how tough you are to make it in this industry – perpetuates many of these at-risk behaviors. Remember old school isn't about age. Today's workforce is made up of as many young dinosaurs as it has old ones. An organization's culture creates them."

Kurt nodded his understanding. "It's easy for a new-hire to pick up that attitude. In no time at all, you can't tell the newcomers from the old timers. They all work the same. Mind if I write a few things down while we're talking?"

"Be my guest," said Sam, pausing as Kurt took a pad of paper out of his bag.

"Another mindset is what I call *the bullet-proof mentality*," Sam continued.

"Bullet-proof folks – particularly young people, but don't exclude older workers from this group – think they know it all, particularly their jobs ... and they don't think they'll ever be hurt. It's that tendency to think, 'Nothing can hurt me because I'm a young invincible stud' that gets them injured or killed. As they get older, that idea becomes, 'Nothing's hurt me yet, so why should I worry?'

"Take wearing safety glasses, for instance. What do you *expect* to happen if you don't wear them," Sam asked.

Kurt thought for a moment. “Well, usually nothing except you might get yelled at ... or at least that’s my experience.”

“Exactly!” Sam said, leaning back in his chair. “But, what if – while you were working – something broke and sharp pieces went everywhere or, worse yet, hit you in the face?”

“I’d make sure to wear my safety glasses in the future.”

“The at-risk behaviors we take when we’re in an old school or bullet-proof mindset – like not wearing those glasses – set the stage for many potential outcomes.” Sam explained, drumming the table with the knuckle of a missing forefinger. “You could be lucky enough to never be hit in the eye or you could be unfortunate enough to be blind for life, or even killed. The only place we have any control over the outcome is at the beginning, at the bottom of the pyramid, when we make the choice whether or not to wear our safety glasses.

“Here’s another question for you,” Sam probed. “Do you believe people in your industry can do their jobs with zero incidents?”

“Well ... I’d like to hope so ... but it’s a high-risk industry and we’ve come to expect accidents ... I mean incidents ... will occur,” Kurt responded hesitantly.

“The issue of *what we expect* is very important in establishing a strong safety culture,” Sam explained. “Years ago in Los Angeles, a new teacher came into a school and was told she would be teaching a class of the school’s brightest eleven- and twelve-year-olds. The principal told her the sky was the limit for these kids.

“At the end of the school year, achievement tests showed this new teacher’s class had improved their scores more than any other class in

the school. Most of the students had been so hungry to learn, the new teacher had to supplement the existing curriculum.

“Now here’s the kicker. That new teacher was actually given some of the poorest performers in sixth grade. But, because she expected them to excel, they did.”

“So, how did she manage to improve their performance?” Kurt asked.

“It was all a matter of what the teacher thought about the students – and her expectations,” Sam said. “Remember, the principal told her the sky was the limit for her class. That’s how the teacher saw the students, and superior performance was what she expected.”

“Expectations had no limit,” Kurt commented as he made more notes. “On the other hand, if the principal had told the teacher she was getting a class of poor performers, she might have had low expectations. I know my crew had the highest production rate when they knew what my expectations were. I guess the same is true for safety. People will work to the level of safety expected of them.”

“Exactly,” Sam smiled. “You’re a quick study ... we’re going to get along fine.”

Kurt looked across the table, quizzically.

“Oh, don’t think this is going to be our last discussion. In fact, I’d like to meet with you on a regular schedule, to discuss your progress and help you develop the process necessary to establish a strong culture of safety,” Sam offered. “I say *process* rather than *program* because a program implies it will have an end, and safety is a never-ending effort.”

“I’d be glad to meet regularly. Over the next 120 days, I’m going to need all the help I can get,” Kurt smiled wryly.

“Deal,” said Sam, extending his hand. “Looking forward to it.”

Driving back to the office, Kurt felt a relief of sorts. “Sam knows his stuff,” he said to himself. “On the other hand, with the timeframe I’ve got to work with, Sam needs to help me come up with a way to change our culture fast,” Kurt thought as he parked his car. “And with both company and contractor crews running day and night, not to mention our emergency response teams, we need a safety process people will use both at work and at home, 24/7.”



SNAPSHOT

DEFINITIONS:

1. **At-risk behaviors:** those actions we take day in and day out that put us or someone else at unnecessary risk.
2. **Incident vs. accident:** an accident implies the result is outside our control. In 97 percent of the cases, what happens – the incident – is easily within someone’s control.
3. **Near hit vs. near miss:** maintains focus and accountability on the potential consequence.
4. **Old school mindset:** creates an environment that gets in the way of speaking our concerns.
5. **Bullet-proof mentality:** thinking we won’t be hurt as a result of our actions or behaviors.

ESSENTIAL CONCEPTS:

- ◆ Our expectations are at the core of building a culture of safety and improving performance.
- ◆ People will work to the level of safety that’s expected.



- ◆ The Safety Pyramid illustrates how an at-risk behavior can easily escalate to become a Lost Time Injury or even a fatality. The only place we have control over the outcome is at the base of the pyramid when we choose to do, or allow, an at-risk behavior.