Hercules Offshore streamlines training program, empowers employees to be safety heroes

By David Crochet, Hercules Offshore

IN A LITTLE over four years, Hercules Offshore has grown from a privately held company with five jackup drilling rigs and 22 liftboats to a publicly held international corporation with a fleet of 73 drilling rigs and 64 liftboats, plus a workboat fleet. This growth has seen people and equipment coming from as many as 10 different companies and cultures. With the acquisition of Todco in July 2007, the company quadrupled in size to over 4,000 people! This presented the considerable challenge of growing one HSE or “safety” culture from many different parts.

Early on, the tendency was to take the easy route and rely on the talents of the team, with only a basic safety management framework. Much of that safety management system was cut and pasted from one legacy system or the other, or borrowed from our clients. Working teams were empowered to carry on “business as usual” and do what they know how to do in the management of their day-to-day operations.

Leaving people to “do what they’ve always done” did not, however, foster a united team with common goals. It actually created a protective and closed environment; not one of open dialogue and reporting desired in a robust safety culture. While history is an undeniable part of culture, letting go of history is difficult, and “us and them” factions often result. The question was, “How do we honor the contributions of the legacy companies while shedding attachments in favor of one company culture?”

If culture consists of our “attitudes and beliefs,” growing a safety culture must involve aligning the attitudes and beliefs of the individuals within the organization. It’s not enough to ask, “What do team members believe about their safety management system?” We must ask, “Do they believe in the safety management system?”

Creating belief in the system is key to it being used effectively, if at all. Considering the culture in question consists of thousands of individual attitudes and beliefs; this is challenging enough. The various influences of the many parts make the challenge daunting.

The historical approach of the “safety professional” in growing a culture has been to add to what’s in place. The result often is to complicate the basic tools that are already there, assuming that team members understood them in the first place. We create more detail thinking that more complex is somehow better. In many cases, not only have some of our tools turned into “paper exercises,” many people in the field don’t even get that they should be more!

Hercules Offshore is working under the assumption that the basic safety tools are not obvious and that belief requires education and training. In March 2007, we began an ongoing effort to educate and train everyone in the company. Through our “Hero’s Training,” we set out to:

• Understand purpose
• Streamline/simplify
• Create buy-in and belief
• Engage/enlighten
• Build visibility
• Own accountability
• Show leadership
• Create one culture from many.

“Power Tools” that are critical to Hercules Offshore’s Hero’s Training are job safety analysis, permit to work, time-out and Hero, a behavioral observation tool.

The Hero’s Training is set up to create belief and alignment in the core values of the company, and to create belief and effective utilization of our safety management system. Thinking of our safety management system as a “safety tool box,” there are many tools inside that toolbox that we use everyday.

There are also four key tools that are common to most companies. Possibly the most important, these are the tools most often taken for granted. These are also the tools we focus on: job safety analysis, permits to work, “time-out” (our stop-work responsibility tool) and “Hero” (our behavioral observation tool). We call them the “Power Tools.”

TIME-OUT

Stop-work authority is not a new idea in the offshore industry. Yet time and again, when we investigate incidents, we find that people were watching as the incidents were set in motion. Why don’t individuals speak up?

Part of the answer might be in the language we use. When we speak about “stop-work authority,” we are saying that an individual has the authority or “right” to stop work in progress. The challenge is, we are also saying he has just as much right not to. We now speak
of “stop-work responsibility,” stressing that if one sees something that concerns him, it is not only his right to stop it – it is his job!

Another obstacle might be attributed to bystander apathy, a phenomenon identified by sociologists after an infamous attack on a woman named Catherine Genovese in 1964. Thirty-eight people witnessed all or part of her attack and murder in New York City, yet no one intervened. The case prompted various experiments, and researchers theorized that people do nothing because other people are doing nothing.

This phenomenon seems to be directly related to the day-to-day failings of individuals in the workplace to speak their concerns. The assumption is that it must be alright because no one else is saying anything. Those same sociologists say that the best cure for this phenomenon is educating people that it exists!

There is third reason we have failed to empower individuals to stop work: We failed to give them the tool to do it. Through the years, as we pushed stop-work authority, we left the individuals to exercise that authority as they saw fit. Because we had no common language, very often argument, anger and adrenaline would come into the conversation before people realized that the individual was just trying to do the right thing.

Hero’s Training stresses that “time-out” is the tool for our stop-work responsibility. This familiar expression becomes a common language accompanied by a familiar gesture when noise is a problem. With this common language, we all instantly know what’s going on.

HERO OBSERVATION, CONVERSATION

Behavioral safety is now over a decade old in the offshore industry. Many companies have embraced one observation process or another. Unfortunately, many processes also got sidetracked as they became more about “cards” than about conversations.

Individuals were encouraged or required to participate by observing and writing something on an observation card. Well-meaning supervisors focused on cards and how many their crews were writing as a means of measuring and rewarding participation. As crew members felt the pressure, they tended to take the easy way out and look for good things to write, or to make things up!

In the assessment phase prior to Hero Training, we found that the existing observation process was yielding around 93% “all-safe” observations.

The Hero Conversation Process is one where the emphasis is put on just that – the conversation. Over the course of the three days of Hero’s Training, 90% of the discussion and practice of this process is focused on a conversation. A simple observation card is reviewed only for clarity on the last day. When an individual puts himself or others at risk, there is very little chance that a card written about it will change his behavior; an intervening conversation is far more likely to produce a different result. A Hero Conversation is structured to create that dialogue in a fashion most likely to produce results.

JOB SAFETY ANALYSIS

Risk assessment can be one of the most critical Power Tools in our safety toolbox. While time-out and the Hero Process might be considered proactive in nature, they are actually reactive considering the physical work is ongoing. Job safety analysis is truly proactive. In theory, a job well risk-assessed might even require fewer interventions because we planned well. This probability is lost, however, if our risk assessment tool is lost in paper.

During the assessment phase, we found many cases of pulling out a pre-printed job safety analysis form and simply having work team members sign it without...
any review. The assumption was that crews knew they probably should be doing more with it, but were choosing to side-step the process. Deeper investigation revealed that, in some cases, crew members were not aware that there might be more to it. The act of “just signing the JSA before going to work” had become standard operating procedure.

Job safety analysis is, above all, a thought process and conversation about the job we are about to do, the hazards therein, and what we are going to do to keep the job safe. The steps of that thought process are:

- Job steps – The job is broken down into manageable steps so that we might be thorough when identifying the hazards in the job.
- Hazards – The hazards of each of the job steps are identified, focusing on those most likely to do us harm.
- Reduction Measures – Reduction measures are put into place for each of the hazards, remembering that the most desirable reduction measure is to eliminate the hazard altogether.

Because we have not done a good job of education in the past, workers offshore have lost sight of this simple three-step thought process. They often begin with a discussion of the hazards of the job without breaking the job into steps. They confuse reduction measures for job steps. They routinely go straight to protection or personal protective equipment (PPE) as a reduction measure rather than first looking for ways to eliminate or minimize the hazard. In many cases, they use the risk assessment “buzz words” without ever actually speaking about the specific hazards in the job they are about to do.

And that’s if they speak at all. Many times these vagaries are limited to what’s scrawled on the paper. In Hero’s Training, crew members learn that a simple three-column document is a complement to the risk assessment conversation rather than believe that the form is the risk assessment.

**PERMIT TO WORK**

The permit to work is probably the oldest of the Power Tools, and it has become the most lost in paper. It’s true that a permit system is designed to provide oversight to higher-risk jobs. But as safety professionals continue to add one column after the other to our “permits,” its purpose has become more and more lost. In some cases, this has created the perception that the permit to work and job safety analysis are redundant processes. Getting back to purpose, we have identified four main purposes for a permit to work:

- Cross-checking – Ensuring that this job doesn’t create hazards for or interfere with other jobs and vice versa.
- Informing – Informing the person in charge so that he can inform all necessary parties of the work being performed.
- Higher-level risk management – Ensuring that risks have been assessed and that the higher levels of risk inherent in these type jobs have been managed.
- Authorization – Once the person-in-charge has cross-checked jobs, assured risks/hazards have been identified and managed, and informed involved parties, he will give “permission” for the work to proceed.

To streamline and get back to purpose, a one-page permit to work document was created as a part of the Power Tools. It captures the four main purposes of a permit system and leaves the assessment of risk to the job safety analysis. The document is color-coded for the different types of work possible. In order to get authorization of a job, the applicant simply completes the corresponding color-coded section. If a job involves several types of work, the applicant completes each corresponding section.

If a permit system has become so complicated that team members would rather argue that a job doesn’t need a permit than simply go through the process of getting one, the tool is well on its way to ineffectual.

While HERO is the company stock ticker, “Hero’s” is an acronym we use to represent “Helping Everyone Respond Openly to Safety.” More importantly, Hero represents what any team member can be any day by having conversations about safety and using our safety tools. After all, if having a conversation saves a life, is that not “heroic”?

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