Speaker 1 (00:00):

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Michael Taylor (00:38):

Hello everybody. This is Michael Taylor and Adam Roseman of the global law firm Greenberg Traurig. Welcome to the next episode of the Workplace Safety Review Podcast. I am the chair of the GT OSHA practice group and am based out of our Washington DC and Northern Virginia offices. My colleague Adam is a member of the GT OSHA practice group as well. He is a co-host and he is based out of our Philadelphia office. To learn more about me, Adam or our OSHA practice group, please feel free to go to www.gt.law.com where you'll find the information you're looking for.

Adam Roseman (01:22):

All right, welcome back. Our guest this week, we're really excited about this guest. It's Sam Harkins. Sam has served for more than 30 years in a safety capacity in a number of industries. And he currently serves as the Vice President of Environmental Health and Safety at Versa Integrity Group. Before joining Versa, Sam served as Regional Safety Manager for Turner Industries Group for 19 years, followed by a decade as Vice President of Environmental Health, Safety and Training for Veolia ES Industrial Services North America. During his career, he has served as chairperson on a number of committees, including the OSHA Steering Committee and Houston Contractor Safety Council. Sam attended the Louisiana State University and is recognized by the American Society of Safety Engineers as a corporate safety management safety professional. Sam, thank you so much for joining us on today's podcast.

Sam Harkins (02:23):

Thanks Adam and Mike. I'm glad to be here.

Adam Roseman (02:27):

Thanks. Thanks for coming on and being willing to share your thoughts on safety. So let's jump right to it, Sam. When people in environmental health and safety, in that community, when they talk about workplace safety and health culture, right, that's sort of a throw away term you hear sometimes. What does that really mean? Help our listeners understand that?

Sam Harkins (02:49):

Yeah. I think it goes beyond the workplace because in my mind, when I think of workplace safety culture, I think back in my early days at Turner on very large construction sites. And really, it was driven towards what's happening at the workplace, which is obviously where the action is happening and where the risks are. I think we need to expand that thinking to where it's from the top executive level, all the way down to the field technicians or the field workers in the field, the laborers, whatever, that they have a very shared mindset of what their culture for that organization is.

Sam Harkins (03:31):

So I look at it as a much broader system. I've spent a number of years as you said, kind of gives away my age. But it also talks about where have we come from? Where are we now? And that laborer or that technician in the field must have the same philosophy or thought process about the culture of the

organization as that CEO does, maybe at a little bit different level, but very similar in thinking and understanding of what it is. And they must be aligned as far as that goes.

Adam Roseman ([04:15](#)):

And how do you make that happen? Right. I mean, as a safety professional, how do you sort of square that right from the bottom to the top or the top to the bottom?

Sam Harkins ([04:24](#)):

I mean, I think it's really up to the executives to make it happen. They've got to be visible. They've got to be engaged. They've got to empower the employees and let them know they are empowered from a safety aspect. Communicate through recognition, through engagement, through... I'll give you an example. A thing that we do here at Versa is that we, for the past three years, have really driven the tracking and trending and evaluation of leading indicators being reported. We encourage it. Every leading indicator that's reported each month is reviewed. I mean, actually the executive team dives in and reviews it individually, each one. And they choose a selection for the best leading indicator reported for the month. And we recognize that employee monetarily. We create a video with one of our region operations VPs presenting it to them, and review it with the whole company over the internet. And then many times, we'll put it on social media to be able to just put that word out there.

Sam Harkins ([05:41](#)):

And people went from, "What is a leading indicator?" three years ago to now we're getting 10, 12, sometimes more a month of either stop work authorities, they feel empowered to stop work at any time, hazard recognitions, or near misses, and they're reporting them. And they know that there's obviously not a penalty for reporting them. There's actually a recognition involved in reporting them. So that's how that engagement happens. Our CEO does about a monthly, maybe every other month, all employee video call over Teams. And he talks about safety every time. And he recognizes the employee himself that time and thanks to them for what they do. And he even shares what the stop work authority or the hazard recognition that was selected. So it's obvious to our employees that our executive team knows what's going on out there in the field and they do care.

Adam Roseman ([06:46](#)):

Right, right. That makes sense.

Michael Taylor ([06:48](#)):

So Sam, based on our discussions over the years, I know that developing and or sustaining workplace safety and health culture has been one of your priorities and your focuses during your career. What would you say have been some of the challenges you've had to face trying to do just that in a company that you just start with, for example?

Sam Harkins ([07:14](#)):

I think it is... The last two companies I've joined, we made huge progress. But one of the main reasons that I was asked to join I think was because I had some history in a more proactive, cultural type situation. And the first thing I do is that I try to bring alignment between myself with the executive team, with the operations side of the business, basically. Operations, obviously they have to make money. I mean, this company that we work for, I mean, the purpose of a company is to draw revenue and be

profitable. And so I work to build alignment and help them recognize that's what I'm there for, too. And that we can work together on this.

Sam Harkins (08:12):

And I try to show them the value of improving the safety culture, not only through reduction in losses, but just in personal safety. And I work with them to understand the personal side of safety versus the business side. To me, they're two totally isolated, different things. And once we accomplish that and everybody buys in, which does happen, we find that the business side of it, we can kind of just watch how that develops while we continuously push forward the personal side.

Sam Harkins (08:53):

An example, this may seem kind of old fashioned even nowadays, but every incident, we get a text message. Every incident that happens no matter how minor, whether it's a lagging indicator or a leading indicator, a text message is sent out. Within an hour of it occurring, the VP of Operations is on copied on that. He knows about it. That person knows about it. In many cases, if it's a stop work authority, myself and the VP, sometimes the CEO, will actually call that employee within a couple hours or sometime that same day and thank him for performing the stop work authority.

Sam Harkins (09:35):

And so, those are just little tools, little things that you can do that really just get that communication enhanced between the upper level personnel in your company to the people in the field. And once these ops managers, I've had the ops managers say, "Well, why are you include me in these text messages? Safety's always taken care of that before." And that's the hurdle you got to get over. And they got to understand and know that they own safety. And we help steer the safety. My job is to help steer it, steer the culture, but their job is to make it happen. And they catch on pretty quickly and it works really well. It's amazing. It is kind of fun to watch it happen. You go from text messages and you get kind of some messages back like they're being bothered. And the next thing you know, you got a full blown investigation going on over text. You almost have to pull range back a little bit because they're asking questions about how this happened and that kind of stuff. So they get really engaged.

Michael Taylor (10:40):

So is it safe to say that some institutions that you've been with over the years, or that you're even aware of, will view environmental health and safety department more in the expense category as opposed to the revenue generating category, and therefore lies a difficulty of trying to develop a workplace safety and health culture that's thriving. I mean, is that the kind of things that you've had to deal with over the years?

Sam Harkins (11:16):

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I have. There is organizations that feel like it's a necessary evil. Fortunately, I don't think that lasts too long. It's not that difficult in my experience. And maybe I've been fortunate, but in my experience to change that thought process. And it can be done in a lot of different ways. You start implementing leading indicators and you just ask them to buy in for a while. And you start watching the trend and frequency of leading indicators skyrocketing, or up on a upward curve. And you watch your injury rate going down, which also affects your loss run and everything else. You have to put it all together as a package.

Adam Roseman ([12:07](12:07)):

Hey Sam, real quick. Can you help our audience under... You mentioned leading and lagging indicators. Can you give our audience an example or two of a leading indicator and a lagging indicator on safety?

Sam Harkins ([12:20](12:20)):

Yeah, of course. Now what we classify as leading indicators is a stop work authority. Which an example of that, we had a working at a chemical plant, very large project that we worked on for quite a while. And our employees in the beginning, they were a little hesitant to go up to each other even and say, "Hey the way you're performing that job isn't the safest way to do it." But over time, again, with our executive team and the regional operations manager for that region being so engaged, and them demonstrating that engagement, we've gotten stop work authorities where actually the chemical plant operations personnel, they said, "I'm sorry, you're not performing that job right."

Sam Harkins ([13:09](13:09)):

Well, I'll give you an example. We do ropes access, which means almost similar to kind of a mountaineering type work. Imagine you have a very elevated piece of equipment that needs to be done some type of non-destructive testing. And it would cost a lot of money and time to build a scaffold all the up there where we can gain access via ropes.

Adam Roseman ([13:38](13:38)):

Right.

Sam Harkins ([13:38](13:38)):

And the employees are actually suspended, which scared me to death when I first joined the company and we did that, but I found out that these guys are ultra safe. They're doing a really great job. But where they had the whole area barricade below them and the facility operations actually were just entering the area, no matter what. And they shut down the work. We shut down the work. Our employees came down. They went and had a very polite and professional conversation with the customer employee. The customer employee didn't like it, but he left a little while later. He came back and did it again. And they had to stop work again. So, that's an example.

Sam Harkins ([14:20](14:20)):

There's other examples obviously where you stop a coworker. You do it in a way, and our employees do it in a way where, "I really don't want to see you get hurt, so this is a better way to do it." And then obviously hazard recognitions, we've had people that recognized items left up at an elevation that could fall and could be dropped. We've had several of those. We actually work at Universal Studios in Orlando. We do a lot of maintenance on the rides. So when y'all go down there for vacation and you see a ride shut down, we may be working on that thing at night. So we see something left up here, a tool or a bolt that's loose or something like that, we stop the work and we recognize there's a hazard.

Adam Roseman ([15:09](15:09)):

Hey Sam, so you talked about getting buy in from the top, right? The executive and the operations. Can you talk about the challenges associated with... You're a safety professional. You've got this great safety program. You got pretty policies. How do you ensure that the technicians, as you said, the folks on the

ground, absorb the information and understand your safety training. So how do you turn your pretty policies into action for the laborers? Do you follow?

Sam Harkins ([15:40](#)):

Yeah. Yeah, I do. Well I mean, we have extensive training, obviously. Nowadays it's become to where you give so much training to your employees from a safety aspect. It'll take literally five days to train a new employee to come to work for our company just on the safety side.

Adam Roseman ([16:00](#)):

Yeah.

Sam Harkins ([16:00](#)):

And sometimes it's maybe even an overload. So obviously, they complete the training. They come out to work and then you're hoping that they've retained a lot of that training. And it just takes constant effort by our supervision and our leadership to reinforce that training. We do safety audits on all our jobs so we can monitor it to see if there is a non-compliance or a discrepancy from what our training was provided to how they're actually behaving in the field. Then we need to correct that.

Sam Harkins ([16:37](#)):

And we take it a step further because I remember an experience when I joined an organization years ago. The first few weeks I spent looking at incident reports that had been done over the previous year or so. And there was a category that said unsafe employee behavior, and that box was checked just about every time. And we modified that form because, yeah, I would agree that in most cases there is some unsafe employee behavior that's involved in an incident that occurs. But why? Why did that behavior take place? Why did we allow it to take place? Why are we accepting employee behavior like that?

Sam Harkins ([17:19](#)):

So we work very hard to recognize our employees. At the same time, if their behavior is unacceptable, and we don't find that it is a failure on our management side of making sure that our employee understood what behavior is appropriate, then we have to take disciplinary action to deal with that as well.

Adam Roseman ([17:44](#)):

Right. That's helpful.

Michael Taylor ([17:46](#)):

Hey Sam, this is Mike. Is developing and sustaining a positive workplace safety and health culture today different than it was, say 25 years ago in your career? And if so, how?

Sam Harkins ([18:03](#)):

Yeah, I would say it's night and day. I mean, 25 years ago, I hadn't been in my career path for very long. It was very compliance driven. If the OSHA regulation said this, this is what you did. If the company policy said this, and it was more of a safety cop atmosphere, which I'm totally against. But yeah, that's kind of the original safety industry that I grew up in.

Sam Harkins ([18:37](#)):

Again, I think we've learned a lot of lessons in the safety profession. That's really not the way to get things accomplished. I'll give you an example. And I use this example quite often. It's pretty simple, but it works. You walk up to an employee standing at the bottom of the scaffold. He's about to climb the scaffold. He's got his harness on. Everything looks to be fitted right. Everything's going right. And you ask that employee one question, "Why are you wearing your harness? Why are you wearing it correctly?" And if his answer is, "Because I might get fired.", then you correct them. And you explain that's the wrong answer. The answer is because we want you to get back home safely.

Sam Harkins ([19:17](#)):

And that's the difference. I would say 25 years ago, even us as the safety professionals were, "Yeah, you'll get fired if you don't do it. This is why you got to do it." Now, at least in organizations I'm part of, we take a totally different turn. And although there could be discipline involved in the result, at the same time we're going to try to get out there and get in front of them and explain to them that the reason that we have this regulation, the reason we have this procedure is because this is what could go wrong. And we want you to be safe. We want you to return home. We want you to be able to provide for your family.

Sam Harkins ([20:04](#)):

And I actually do a target zero workshop. That's about six hours long and we're slowly but surely working our way through the company for all employees to attend it. And it's pretty extensive. There's nothing about total recordable rate in it. There's nothing about workers comp cost in it. It's really to dive in and recognize, why do you work safely?

Adam Roseman ([20:33](#)):

And Sam, do you feel like the employees... Do you feel like they're able to absorb that message and the safety requirements of the workplace if you take it out of the compliance realm and put it into the personal realm?

Sam Harkins ([20:47](#)):

Absolutely. Yeah.

Adam Roseman ([20:49](#)):

Yeah. It's more like this positive reinforcement, right?

Sam Harkins ([20:52](#)):

Absolutely. I mean, there's an aspect at the end of the workshop where, I hate to give too much away, but employees have to sit in the room for 20 minutes in silence with a pad of paper in front of them and a pen. And they're writing a letter to a loved one on why they're not coming home. And I'm going to tell you, the employees that come out of that workshop, many of them are balling their eyes out. And when they come out of that workshop, they're saying, "I never want to go through that again. I never want to go through that." And obviously if you're not coming home, you're not writing a letter, but at the same time you could be writing a letter to a friend because I didn't stop you from doing something wrong and I allowed this to happen.

Sam Harkins ([21:43](#)):

And so, it is a pretty intense experience. I get reviews on it. They said I was, "The best workshop I've ever been through, except for the letter. And I hope I never had to do that again." And they walk away and it is just amazing, the evolution you see in these employees and how they look at their workplace safety when they walk back out there on the job.

Adam Roseman ([22:09](#)):

Yeah. Sam, all of this sort of intuitively makes sense, but are you aware of sort of any studies or anything sort of formal that's been performed that correlates the concept of workplace safety and health culture that we've been talking about and injury and illness and fatality rates? Right? I mean, at the end of the day, the numbers are important to ops and safety folks. So how do you show the correlation?

Sam Harkins ([22:34](#)):

Well I mean, as far as an industry wide study, there's a lot of articles out of a professional safety journal put out by the ASSP. Over the years, they've done many behavioral type articles, which includes some studies. The only thing I can really speak to is internally. And we've watched our injury rate go down. We've watched our losses rate go down dramatically. We just celebrated when we totaled up all our numbers and our statistics for 2021. We recognized that we had achieved 4 million work hours without a OSHA recordable injury as of December 31st, which equates to 22 months without a recordable injury. Anywhere from right now we're at 850 employees at one time, within that 22 months, we were at 1200 employees, depending on workload from customers and project size. So I mean, that's the study that I look at. I look at it internally. We look at it on executive level or monthly basis during our meetings. We're continuously monitoring our progress and watching our frequency rate of leading indicator reporting go up as our negative on the lagging side goes down.

Michael Taylor ([24:08](#)):

Do you find that once you've developed a workplace safety and health culture, does that correlate or translate into positive numbers in terms of complying with existing environmental health and safety regulations? Meaning, "Okay. I've developed this great culture and it's leading into great compliance in the field in terms of... And then ultimately, minimizing injury and illnesses and fatalities in the workplace."

Sam Harkins ([24:43](#)):

Oh, for sure. Yeah. I mean, understanding there's a lot of employees that are still asked the question, "Well, why does this regulation say we have to do it this way?" And when you change that attitude, when you change it to a more proactive attitude, when the employees recognizes, gets to the point where they understand that they're going to be recognized for a proactive approach towards safety, they're looking at it. And they're recognizing that these regulations are written for them for a reason. So, yes. I mean, my compliance, we monitor it on a regular basis. I have eight, or I'm sorry, six EHS managers, and the same number of radiation safety officers because we do some radiographic type work. And they're constantly doing audits. And so, we see our compliance numbers improve as well. Yeah.

Michael Taylor ([25:48](#)):

Terrific. Terrific. One last question, Sam. And we really appreciate you being on the show. Of your 30 plus years of being in this industry, what are some of your most proud accomplishments?

Sam Harkins ([26:06](#)):

Unfortunately, I'm going to start on a little bad hand, I guess. Unfortunately, I have had the responsibility to investigate a few fatalities. This was years in the past, but it is a very difficult, difficult thing to do. It's not something that you wish on anyone, but I've seen the companies that I've worked for just evolve away from that concern. And that's not even in our mindset. Obviously we don't want to have a fatality, but we're not even thinking fatality. We're thinking about not a blood blister on a finger type mentality.

Michael Taylor ([26:54](#)):

Right.

Sam Harkins ([26:54](#)):

And I think I've been instrumental. I hope I've been instrumental in working with employees. I mean, I think probably the most exciting for quite a few years is the 4 million man hour mark. That's a new deal. And we're going to actually start celebrations within the next month or so going to a number of our key sites. And our plan is to have some luncheons and have some customers invited. But more importantly, our employees invited, and myself will be standing side by side with regional operations managers and the CEO to dish up plates of lunch for people, just thanking them for what they're doing. I think that's probably one of the most proudest moments, just to know that unfortunately I've been involved in the fatality investigation, which I wish that on no one. But get to the point where you feel confident that you've got a culture that has been evolved where you're partially involved in helping promote that now we're busting our tails, recognizing people rather than going back and investigating people being injured.

Michael Taylor ([28:15](#)):

Yeah. That's awesome, Sam. In my personal view, there needs to be more Sam's out there in the world in the EHS community, because to me, this is the heart of workplace safety and health, right. Is having a culture and a mindset that's positive and embraces it so that people can go home to their loved ones, just like they came to work, which was safe and secure. Right?

Sam Harkins ([28:42](#)):

Thank you, Mike. Yeah. I am a true believer that personal safety, you take care of personal business with your employees and you let them know that it is personal to you. And the business side of it, the numbers, the dollars, everything else, it'll take care of itself.

Michael Taylor ([29:02](#)):

Thank you so much, Sam. This was really a pleasure and an honor to have you on our show. We enjoyed every minute of it.

Sam Harkins ([29:11](#)):

Likewise. Thank you.

Michael Taylor ([29:13](#)):

All right. Stay tuned for the next episode of the Workplace Safety Review Podcast.