



How DEKRA OSR Helped Transform the Safety Culture at Utilities Giant, Penelec

FirstEnergy is an energy provider located in Akron, Ohio that operates more than 24,500 miles of transmission lines that connect the Midwest and the Mid-Atlantic regions. Penelec, one of its 10 regulated distribution companies, serves about 600,000 customers in Pennsylvania alone.

It was early 2017 when Scott Wyman, Penelec’s President, contacted DEKRA Organizational Safety and Reliability (OSR) to help get his supervisors better at leading safety in the field. He assumed it would take a few months and the whole process would wrap up by the summer.

His DEKRA OSR consultant told him otherwise. Wyman was told: “If your managers aren’t trained and your general managers aren’t trained and your directors aren’t trained and you as a president don’t understand what is happening, how are you ever going to be in a position to support it?”

Even still, Wyman didn’t believe it would take long. That is, until he sat in his first workshop.

Week after week, Wyman began to understand that his assumptions for how to create a safe workplace were inaccurate. Safety was not as simple as reacting to the latest mistake, but it was more about controlling exposure. Through DEKRA OSR’s Blueprint for Safety Transformation™, DEKRA’s conceptual

Penelec

A division of FirstEnergy Corp.

Meadville, Pennsylvania

Utilities

700+ Employees

DEKRA OSR helped reduce exposure and injuries.

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model that illustrates the key elements required to achieve safety excellence, Wyman had his “ah-ha” moment:

“As leaders we think we’re doing everything right, but [the Blueprint] made me realize that when you boil it down, leadership is way more accountable for the safety of employees than they are,” he said.

“All this time, for 26 years, I was saying ‘why did he or she do that?’ when there was a problem. But now I learned that instead of them being accountable, it really starts with me.”

Wyman immediately abandoned his expectation to finish the process by summer. Instead, he worked with DEKRA OSR to completely transform the way Penelec handles safety, a process that took two nearly two years, resulting in many changes at Penelec including improving the company’s recordable injury rate. In September 2017, the rate had spiked to 4. As of March 2019, the recordable injury rate was .5.

Changing the Culture Through the Executive Leading With Safety Solution

At Penelec, creating wholesale cultural change was, in the beginning, a challenge.

Because of tensions with two employee labor unions that resulted in a strike and later, a lockout, “there wasn’t a lot of love” between employees and management. Making things worse in that relationship was Penelec’s approach to safety: “Just focus on the injury and use blunt force to make a change,” Wyman said. In other words, if people were getting hurt, the company generally responded by telling them not to repeat the actions that got them hurt.

Through interviews with leadership, DEKRA OSR consultants realized that company leaders were indeed passionate about creating a stronger safety environment, but they just didn’t realize what was required of them or fully understand how to manage safety effectively. Injuries were blamed on the employees. That not only negatively impacted morale, it didn’t get the company where they needed to go in terms of mitigating exposure.

What helped turn things around was DEKRA OSR’s Executive Leading With Safety® approach that focuses on an entire upper management team’s deep understanding of how safety functions and provides the support for each to understand how each of their decisions impact exposure, beliefs, climate, and culture. This became a process — evidenced by each leader having their own “ah-ha” moments at different times. Dekra’s approach ensures that every leader has this understanding. The result is a team that is aligned, focused and positioned to make positive change.

Every month for 12 months, DEKRA OSR worked with leadership to help them deeply understand key concepts related to safety, help them set objectives personally and for their areas of responsibility, and then work with them to develop a roadmap to make those objectives sustainable. The consultants made sure they calibrated with the company objectives and got to know them from a business standpoint.

From there they put together a safety strategy which involved creating objectives for each leader that would be tracked each month during their one-on-one sessions. Coaching 16 individual leaders took place in the office and in the field where each one was observed to verify their understanding of safety concepts. They also became keenly at identifying the potential exposures that create risk.

Additionally, leadership learns how their actions reinforce to their workers that safety concerns take top priority and that they speak to the organization’s commitment to the ultimate goal of zero injury.

Executive Leading with Safety is fundamental to a building a relationship between upper management and workers, where leaders model genuine care and concern for the well-being of the employee no matter if they are on or off the job. When employees believe leaders truly care about them, they are more likely to do more for the organization – including being more committed to working safer.

Empowering Both Leadership and Workers to Identify and Correct Exposure

Wyman said creating a personal leadership action plan, which requires senior management to engage with front-line workers on a regular basis to focus on making their jobs safer, helped them build stronger relationships with employees. By reframing discussions “on the exposure and not on the injury,” he discovered that upper management earned worker trust and respect.

“In the past when there were injuries all we did was ask ‘what did the employee do wrong?’ If they didn’t follow a rule, our solution was to write another rule,” he said. “But when you talk about exposure, you’re thinking about it from the perspective of what went wrong in our system or training that we need to fix. We’re no longer pointing at the employees.”

Workers themselves became more engaged in promoting safety as well. One example: An apprentice lineman was empowered to suggest how a Penelec work crew on a hospital project in Erie could reduce exposure to electrical shock or death. Through enhanced safety training he realized that his co-workers were vulnerable to exposure when working in a trench where underground lines are carrying 34,000 volts. The worker suggested that to reduce risk they should use a new grounded underground conductor tool that is grounded while cutting the live feed.

“You don’t want anyone in that trench touching it until you know it’s grounded,” said Wyman. “Because of this training, I’m hearing more and more stories like this one that reflects our strong safety culture.”

For Penelec, a company that just two years ago had a challenging relationship with its employees, the Executive Leading With Safety solution introduced all the ingredients to build that trust back up: Transparency, authenticity, and accountability.

“It was a breath of fresh air” for improving those relationships, said Wyman.

“When you start focusing on improving your leadership and then you tie it to working with employees to reduce or control exposure, you’re now talking about incidents before they occur,” said Wyman.

“That changed everything for the better.”

Learn More:

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