

Safety Corner

Application of broken windows theory in safety management

The “broken windows theory” is a controversial concept in criminology. The theory proposes that better monitoring and maintaining order in urban environments can reduce petty crimes and prevent more serious crimes based on the observation that vandals are likely to break more windows in the neighbourhood and commit more serious crimes if broken windows are not repaired promptly. The theory also encourages authorities to get tough on misdemeanours such as graffiti, and even on traffic infractions and petty crimes such as public intoxication.

The application of the theory has been extended to safety management by comparing prevention of violent crimes in a neighbourhood with prevention of serious accidents in the workplace. Supporters of the theory argue that, if the management enforces better housekeeping and minor safety rules such as the wearing safety shoes and helmet when required, it is less likely that a major safety accident would occur. They assert that that sloppy safety standard breeds injuries and it is hard to find a workplace with a bad housekeeping record with a good safety record. The 5-S approach, whose objective is similar to that of broken windows theory, has shown to boost the morale, encourage a sense of pride, and promote ownership of responsibilities; and by doing so, enhance safety culture.

Critics of the theory argue that there is no conclusive statistical evidence showing broken windows policing reduces serious crime in a neighbourhood. They contend that it is misleading to assume preventing lower level incidents will automatically prevent the higher level incidents, and management may lose sight of more serious accidents when too much attention is placed on minor offenses. One supporting example is the senior management tour took place the day before the Deepwater Horizon accident. The senior management team focused on minor occupational safety matter instead of major accident contributors that could have prevented the catastrophe.

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