The Dangers of Miscommunication

Miscommunication unfortunately happens often and may have vast consequences. A prime example of miscommunication and its ramifications can be seen through the Tysons Food Plant Industry, as on June 27, 2011 at the Tysons Food Plant in Springdale, Arkansas, an employee caused a chlorine gas leak, releasing toxic into the work environment and therefore causing hundreds of other employees to be immediately evacuated and rushed to the hospital (“CDC Determines Cause of Toxic Chemical Leak at Food Processing Plant”). The results were dire, leaving “150 workers in the hospital [and] 5 [requiring] intensive care” (Hensley, Scott). According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, this incident is claimed to have had happened because “a worker who couldn’t read the English-language label on a barrel of chemicals inadvertently poured bleach into it…” (“Language Barrier to Blame for Tysons Food Poisonous Leak Last Year”). However, as a company, Tysons has a different take on the incident. Overall, it is unclear whether or whether not the situation was due to miscommunication.

While many believe that the root of the problem was the failure to communicate, as “the worker who mixed the chemicals by mistake ‘had limited English skills, and was unable to read the label on the drum,”’ Tysons spokesman Gary Mickelson argues otherwise, as he states, “the NIOSH study incorrectly [identified] the employee who accidently mixed the chemicals as being Spanish-speaking,” asserting that “the worker responsible is not Hispanic and his primary language is English.” Mickelson also emphasizes, “this employee had previously received
hazardous chemical training” (Hensley, Scott). Through making his argument, the communicative burden is no longer placed on the company but on the employee. Moreover, by claiming that the employee is a native English speaker, Tysons is also taking the bilingual responsibility off them.

One article states, “the worker who mixed the sodium hypochlorite with the leftover acidic solution told investigators he knew such a mixture was dangerous but did not recognize the drum and could not read the label to ascertain its contents” (“Language Barrier to Blame for Tysons Food Poisonous Leak Last Year”). This implies that the worker was perfectly capable of reading the label, but in this instance, chose to be careless (The Associated Press). At the very least, the said employee should not have implicitly assumed what the label stated. If he was not sure, he should have explicitly asked for help.

Putting aside what happened on June 27, 2011 and what was going on through that specific employee’s mind, the broader issue at play is safety issues when dealing with non-native workers and how to eliminate this ambiguity. What is noteworthy is that, regardless of the cause of the incident, Tysons took action to make sure this preventable situation will never occur again. As stated by the CDC, the “chlorine release and its resultant health effects were preventable” (“Language Barrier to Blame for Tyson Foods Poisonous Leak Last Year”). As a company, Tysons listened when CDC stated, “all communication, training, and signage in the workplace should be easy-to-read and provided in languages understood by workers” (“Language Barrier to Blame for Tyson Foods Poisonous Leak Last Year”). Tysons took CDC’s advice seriously and implemented their suggestions, such as actively engaging workers in hands-on training to help overcome language and literary obstacles (“Language Barrier to Blame for Tyson Foods Poisonous Leak Last Year”). Even though Tysons still rejected the theory that
miscommunication is to blame, as they said, “the report was based on a false premises,” they still felt the need to prevent future mishaps and therefore announced “corrective measures were already in place” (“Language Barrier to Blame for Tyson Foods Poisonous Leak Last Year”). The company knew that, regardless of reasoning, their company’s face was in jeopardy and they had to protect their reputation. They attempted this by “[putting] additional controls in place to limit access to chemicals and…[continuing] to emphasize training for those authorized to handle such chemicals…” (“Language Barrier to Blame for Tyson Foods Poisonous Leak Last Year”).

However, even though the company made these changes as a part of a corrective process to save their reputation, these steps are potentially ineffective. The solution is not more chemical training and better labeling systems. While this is helpful, as the incident could have occurred due to willful negligence, agency issues, or register issues, such as the inability to read a confusing abbreviation, the more pressing issue is power. Therefore, a more effective corrective process would be to implement empowerment training.

While there are many potential motivations behind the miscommunication in this situation, one motivation that makes this issue repeatable, is power. Perhaps the employee believed he was on the bottom of the totem pole of hierarchy and therefore assumed he was so low that he could not have the power to do something so dangerous. Maybe he believed that a worker like himself would not have access to such life-threatening chemicals. Therefore, a session on empowerment would help employees realize the severity of what they are dealing with at work.

Overall, since facts prove that the majority of Tysons workers speak Spanish or Marshallese as their first language, the company should be more aware of the two different discourse systems in operation. At the very least, Tysons, as a company, should have been at the
conscious incompetence stage; the authority figures should have been aware of their lack of awareness and should therefore had already implemented policies before such a situation occurred.

**Works Cited**


