

**Lee Shelby**

will be presenting a keynote address on “Triumph Over Tragedy” at *EHS Today’s 2019 Safety Leadership Conference*. The conference will be held Nov. 5-7 in Dallas, Texas. For more information: [safetyleadership-conference.com](http://safetyleadership-conference.com).



# Saving Lives and Limbs through **SAFETY CULTURE**

*A safety culture requires specific, intentional actions aimed at avoiding and preventing potentially harmful situations.*

**By Lee Shelby**

I spent 23 days in the hospital, seven months in physical therapy, and I was out of work for over 10 months. All this happened for one reason: I took a shortcut. I weighed 225 pounds the day of my accident and walked out of the hospital at 180 pounds. I was physically, mentally and emotionally a different person.

In 1991, I was a power lineman for a utility company in Tennessee. Part of my job was to install, repair and remove overhead distribution power lines. This was a dream job for me. I loved standing on two inches of steel 50 feet off the

bolt cutters, and I accidentally touched the back of my right hand to an energized overhead conductor.

Thirteen thousand, two hundred volts of electricity passed through my unprotected hands. It's a miracle I'm alive. Six surgeries over the next five days were unable to save my hands. Today, I am a bilateral below-the-elbow amputee.

Thank God I survived and lived to tell about it. It's been almost 30 years since my accident. Today, my life's work has become motivating and teaching people the importance of workplace safety.

and employees integrate practices that prevent potentially dangerous situations. Safety is personal to me. My mistake didn't only change my life; it affected my family, friends, my coworkers and my medical team.

I accept responsibility for my actions, and I am grateful to be able to tell my story to help others understand why occupational safety is essential. Today, I speak to companies all over the world teaching safety and personal responsibility. It's not just your life that is affected by an injury like this. My coworkers had to pull me out of the bucket. They didn't know if I would survive. They saw the gloves pulled off my burned hands. It wasn't a pretty sight. It was a traumatic event for all that were involved.

When you don't follow the safety rules, there are consequences. Those consequences can follow you for the rest of your life. I never considered the effect an injury would have on my family. It was devastating for them when I lost my hands. My daughter has been walking on this Earth for 25 years, and I've never held her hand. My son played baseball as he was growing up. I coached his team since he started playing, but I couldn't teach him how to wrap his fingers around the laces of a baseball to execute a pitch.

I also have to live with the loss of touch. I can never caress my wife's face with my hand or feel her skin with my hand. I've had to accept living life this way because of my choice on August 12, 1991.

## CREATING A SAFETY CULTURE

I don't consider myself a victim. Everything that day was under my control. What happened to me was my responsibility. I consider myself to be fortunate to survive. I'm grateful that I am still here today to empower people, so they don't make the same mistake I did. What I want to do in my overall message is to educate, motivate and inspire everyone to develop a culture of safety.

When I came back to work after my accident, the standards, policies and procedures changed. Safety was brought to the forefront because the

---

## I accept responsibility for my actions, and I am grateful to be able to tell my story to help others understand why occupational safety is essential.

---

ground. And what a rush to hold 13,000 volts of electricity in my hands. It was exhilarating!

Was it a dangerous job? Yes, but it never concerned me. I grew up watching my friend's dad do linework and knew that's what I wanted to do for a living. I went to work confident that I would be safe. I was a little cocky and thought it would be the "other guy" that was injured.

The safety manual for my job was thick. I am sure it took a lot of time and effort to create it. I knew exactly what the protocol was for the job I was working on the day of my accident. The safety rule explicitly said, "You WILL wear your rubber gloves if you are in reaching distance of a primary conductor." I walked right past the bin with the rubber gloves in it, and I didn't grab them on purpose. I didn't call for one of my coworkers to bring them to me either.

To handle high-voltage electricity in your hands, you were supposed to wear the proper personal protective equipment (PPE). In this case, I should have been wearing specialized rubber gloves. Instead, I had put on a pair of ordinary leather gloves. I was holding a pair of

## SAFETY IS MORE THAN MEETINGS AND PROCEDURES

The reason I share my story is that I want people to know that safety is about more than meetings and procedures. It's about sending people home safely every night. I tell my story because I want people to understand what can happen to them and the people who work for them as a result of taking shortcuts. Being complacent and getting distracted in the workplace can change your life in an instant.

Employers provide PPE, but that doesn't ensure an employee will use the equipment properly or that they will use it when required. Employees can become overconfident and cut corners. That's what happened to me. My ego got in the way of following the proper procedures. Employees don't consider the long-term consequences of a severe injury. They focus on making a deadline or completing a job faster. For this reason, regular safety training, reminders and supervision should be a priority.

Commitment to safety is an ongoing process. It's essential that employers



company I worked for didn't want to see an accident like mine ever happen again. Thirteen thousand volts passed through my body. It doesn't seem plausible that I would survive.

The culture of the company began to change after my accident. People started looking out for each other. They called attention to risky behavior and situations more often. People no longer let luck be the reason they made it home each night. As a safety speaker, I've had many people talk to me about how lucky they've been in a work situation when they were not following safety protocols. The definition of luck is: success or failure apparently brought by chance rather than through one's own actions. Safety is not about luck. It's about specific, intentional actions that avoid a potentially harmful situation.

Safety culture is defined by a company's values, attitudes and beliefs about safety.

Safety management is not one person's job. There has to be a deep concern for the well-being of all employees from the top down. It's everyone's responsibility—from the CEO to the entry-level employee—to make safety a priority. It must be embedded in management systems and processes.

Each employee must do their part to motivate each other to act safely. Many times, employees hold back from speaking up when they see someone engaging in potentially dangerous behavior and not following safety procedures. Why does this happen? There are many reasons people don't speak up:

- Fear of looking foolish.
- Fear of retaliation.
- Not wanting to challenge an authority figure or someone who has seniority.
- Not wanting to be seen as a complainer.
- Not wanting to alienate a coworker.

Many of these reasons may be valid feelings, but in a safety culture, no excuse overrides the sanctity of life or limb. The priority should be to do what is best for the greater good of the individual. One of the worst feelings you could experience is to know you could have prevented an injury or life-altering event by calling attention to unsafe behavior.

Safety must be celebrated within a work culture. Positive reinforcement

keeps the culture motivated to continue its efforts. It's essential to value and recognize a job well done. As employees feel cared about, the positive safety culture will flourish.

Almost 30 years have passed since my occupational injury. I can tell my story by the facts of what happened. I let go of the emotional attachment to the tragedy, and I replaced it with thoughts of hope and triumph. I am

committed to teaching the importance of occupational safety and changing the safety culture of companies all over the world. **EHS**

*Lee Shelby is an internationally recognized motivational and workplace safety speaker. He empowers people around the world through his interactive, educational and heartfelt conviction. He can be contacted by email at [Lee@LeeShelby.com](mailto:Lee@LeeShelby.com)*

# Superior Suction, Safety & Solutions. Guaranteed.



VAC-U-MAX compressed-air powered industrial vacuum cleaners are engineered for 100% more suction power for even the finest powders and combustible dusts - now ATEX Certified - the first line offering for Class I & Class II hazardous area locations. Since 1954 VAC-U-MAX provided "Intrinsically Safe" Industrial Hygiene Solutions for flammable liquids, combustible dusts and reactive powders.



SINGLE SOURCE  
CUSTOM ENGINEERING  
APPLICATION EXPERTISE

**VAC-U-MAX**  
DELIVERING MORE

GLOBAL SERVICE & SUPPORT  
100% GUARANTEED  
SINCE 1954



VET/DRY • AIR OPERATED & ELECTRIC DRUM-TOP • CONTINUOUS DUTY • COMBUSTIBLE DUST CENTRAL SYSTEMS • CONTINUOUS-BAGGING • LIQUID & SLUDGE • FLAMMABLE LIQUIDS SUBMERGED RECOVERY • METALWORKING • PHARMACEUTICAL • STEEL SHOT INTERCEPT HOPPERS & PRE-SEPARATORS • HSE / INDUSTRIAL HYGIENE SOLUTIONS

69 WILLIAM STREET • BELLEVILLE, NJ 07109 • [www.vac-u-max.com](http://www.vac-u-max.com) • (800) VAC-U-MAX