

# **General Motors: Achieving and Maintaining World-Class Leadership in Worker Health and Safety in the Automotive Industry**

## **Preface**

This case study describes how GM Canada's Oshawa Truck Assembly Centre achieved significant improvements in safety performance by modifying its overall safety strategy and its approach to safety leadership.

The purpose of this case study is to teach students the importance of having an appropriate approach to health and safety, and treating leadership in safety as an overriding principle of a company's operation.

The approach taken in developing this case study included a review of archival corporate and plant data, including corporate human resources and health and safety policies, documentation on the implemented safety strategies, and historical safety performance indicators and data for the plant. Discussions were also carried out with key plant personnel.

General Motors of Canada was selected for this case study because of its leadership and commitment to safety, and because it had undertaken, and continues to support, projects in which safety issues are particularly salient. General Motors views its success as closely linked to its commitment to safety leadership in the automotive industry.

This case study is organized as follows. First, background is provided on the history, operations and technological developments of GM Canada's Oshawa Truck Assembly Centre. Second, the Centre's safety history is described, including a tracking of the Centre's performance in safety over the last 15 years. Next, the reasons why health and safety management became important at the Centre and the factors that contributed to this recognition are discussed. Then, the approach taken by the Centre management to improve occupational health and safety, and the key elements of the company's health and safety management system and approach are explained. This includes a review of the implementation of General Motors Safety Core Elements and a discussion of its approach to developing a safety culture in the workplace. Next, the improvements in occupational health and safety attained are described, along with accolades and other forms of recognition. Details are given to provide a clear understanding of the company's perspective on health and safety, and how it has influenced the firm's performance, in terms of profitability and workplace health and safety outcomes. Finally, several key lessons learned are summarized and closing remarks are provided.

Questions are provided to promote further thought and discussion, and to encourage the reader to expand on the ideas presented in this case study and to consider other applications. Such activities complement the use of the case study in the classroom.

This case study is suitable for a broad audience including undergraduate and graduate business and engineering students, practicing engineers and technologists, and managers and senior executives. The case study is particularly suited for courses like Occupational Health and Safety Management, Workplace Design and Organizational Behaviour.

The author invites feedback and comments from interested parties and users, so that the case study can be enhanced in the future.

## **1. Introduction**

It is the mid 1990s and General Motors faces serious challenges regarding health and safety(4). The corporation's senior leadership decides at that time to take action to improve significantly General Motors' health and safety record, at all of its facilities (4).

One such facility is the General Motors of Canada (GM Canada) Truck Assembly Centre based in Oshawa, Ontario, Canada. Like other General Motors facilities, the Oshawa Truck Assembly Centre is trying in the mid 1990s to address serious occupational health and safety concerns. Senior management has already taken many positive steps, including putting into place all necessary policies regarding health and safety, but the results in terms of improved health and safety and not as successful as desired. To further improve the situation, outside help is sought.

Flash forward to 2007 and the situation is entirely different at the Oshawa Truck Assembly Centre. Injuries, lost days and worker safety concerns are down markedly. In fact, the Centre is receiving accolades for its occupational health and safety performance and is recognized as a leader in this area in the industry, especially in its approach to managing workplace health and safety.

This case study describes the steps taken and measures implemented by GM Canada's Oshawa Truck Assembly Centre to dramatically improve its safety record, ultimately allowing that Centre to become both a leader and model in the automotive industry for workplace safety.