

The AGA Peer Review Program

Pursuing a Leading Safety Program

In 2011, as part of an ongoing effort to enhance industry safety, the North American energy pipeline trade associations analyzed safety programs and information exchange initiatives used in the aviation, chemical, firefighting, nuclear, rail and trucking industries. An opportunity was identified to develop a peer-to-peer discussion program that would offer an effective venue for operators to compare safety and operational initiatives and identify leading practices and opportunities to enhance their performance.

In 2013 & 2014 the American Gas Association (AGA) piloted a voluntary peer-to-peer safety and operational practices review program with ten member companies. As a result of the pilot's success, AGA instituted a national Peer Review Program in January 2015 that is open to natural gas utilities in its membership. The insights gained and industry-based collaborations built is helping to advance safe and reliable natural gas delivery throughout the United States.

The AGA Peer Review Program

Nearly 60 AGA member companies located in the United States and Canada volunteered to participate in the inaugural phase of the Peer Review program. The companies range in customer count from 35,000 to almost 6 million. Each phase of the program is three years, with the first phase starting in January 2015 and concluding in December 2017. In each phase, all companies participating in the program are reviewed and agree to send subject matter experts to review peer companies. During a company's review, subject matter experts from peer companies interview company employees (executives, middle management, crew leaders, field workers, and union representatives) and contractors. A typical review lasts four days, includes 12 – 17 subject matter experts and 60 – 100 interviews, with the final day featuring a verbal report that highlights the review team's observations to the company's leadership.

Reviews are focused on three topics relevant to employee, public, and pipeline safety and system reliability to determine leading practices as well as opportunities for improvement. The three introductory topics are:

- Safety Culture
- Worker Procedures & Technical Training
- Pipeline Safety Risk Management

Companies that completed the three introductory topics may select two of the following topics for their next review:

- Contractor Construction Relationships
- Emergency Preparedness & Public Awareness
- Damage Prevention
- Workforce Development & Succession Planning
- Quality Management

Each review team's objective is to gain an understanding of the company's practices, procedures and standards in an effort to identify strengths and leading initiatives of the company along with areas that potentially need attention or improvement. Subject matter experts from each of the participating companies, chosen by company leadership for their expertise and experience, visit companies in their peer group to observe facilities and operations, and to interview employees and contractors throughout all sectors of the organization on practices, procedures, initiatives and safety culture. Participating companies are devoting significant time and resources to the effort, demonstrating their commitment to enhancing the safety of the industry, their belief in the benefits of the peer review process, and their dedication to the success of the program.

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Results

Feedback from program participants and industry leaders has been overwhelmingly positive, with participating companies finding the reviews to be a valuable resource in helping to identify leading practices and ways to further enhance their safety performance. The nature of the program has allowed participants to build a strong level of trust, which, in addition to their deep industry knowledge, has led to an honest, open and productive process. Executives and participants alike make it clear they view the reviews a success and have expressed a sincere belief that the review team's observations will help enhance and improve the company's operations.

The experience is granting participants the opportunity to form relationships with peers that continue beyond a review and facilitate information sharing and trust across the natural gas industry. Reviewers benefit from the opportunity to learn from the programs they observed and gain a deep understanding of fellow company practices that could guide their own efforts in enhancing employee, public, and pipeline safety.

Observations

While each company review provides unique observations, there are themes that are frequently, though not uniformly, identified. Some of those themes and the industry's resultant initiatives are listed below:

- **Safety Culture:** Across the industry, leadership and stakeholders continue to stress the importance of safe work environments and personal safety. This consistent messaging enhances employees' confidence and authority to promote safety culture principles that are core to the work they do. In an effort to constantly improve and implement safety culture concepts within Pipeline Safety Management Systems, the industry is continuing to change the manner in which safety policies are developed. Traditionally these policies were often revised reactively after incidents or near-misses. Now companies are striving to develop proactive programs, which include promoting the reporting of safety concerns, creation of safety teams, and changing incentive programs that may cause under-reporting of safety concerns or injuries.

AGA's annual Safety Summit provides a dedicated venue for companies to share their successful safety programs and initiatives, along with lessons learned from incidents and near misses. This is in addition to AGA's standing Safety & Occupational Health Committee which brings together safety professionals from across the industry to develop innovative solutions to the industry's challenges and AGA's Best Practices Program that allows companies to benchmark their company against others and learn from others.

- **Worker Procedures & Technical Training:** A positive and impactful trend in the industry is the design and construction of state-of-the-art employee training facilities. This investment has allowed new and veteran employees to hone technical skills in environments specifically designed to simulate actual field conditions. However, the industry continues to face long-term workforce development challenges. This includes managing knowledge transfer, developing new employees as seasoned industry experts retire, and the contracting of qualified contractor resources. In addition, many companies continue to seek solutions that help to address field management's need to balance administrative activities and their presence in the field, as well as details and logistics related to the training of their employees.

The recognition of these challenges has resulted in the inclusion of the new Peer Review topic, Workforce Development & Succession Planning. AGA also added a discussion group on Technical Training in 2016 and is hosting a Technical Training Workshop. Additionally, AGA recently launched a Workforce Development Task Force aimed at providing collaborative solutions to workforce development issues, is also actively involved in the Center for Energy Workforce Development, and is involved in efforts to bring veterans into the industry.

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- *Pipeline Risk Management*: The industry has taken great strides to improve the safety and reliability of their pipeline system, often implementing policies and programs that frequently go well beyond federal and state pipeline safety regulations. The industry is looking at ways to build technological consistency throughout all parts of an organization, which will help to ensure that the best technology devices are in place to meet a company's goals. This includes the development of robust Geospatial Information Systems (GIS), work management systems, risk models, and leak detection and leak management systems. The industry also continues to face challenges related to the education and enforcement of 3rd party damage.

In an effort to help the industry address these challenges, AGA's 2016 Best Practices Program focused on the Maintenance of As-Built Documentation and held a roundtable on the Construction of New and Replacement Mains and Services in 2015. Additionally, AGA offers twelve different technical and advocacy committees, as well as eight discussion groups, that focus on areas of pipeline safety. One of the new discussion groups for 2016 directly resulted from the Peer Review Program: Emergency Preparedness & Public Awareness.

- *Contractor Construction Relationships, Damage Prevention, Emergency Preparedness & Public Awareness, Quality Management, and Workforce Development & Succession Planning*: To date there has been limited participation in these new topics, as many of the pilot program participating companies are being reviewed in 2017. Once there is additional participation, trending observations can be identified.

Continuous Improvement

The Peer Review Program is gas companies helping gas companies raise the bar on safety. The program is a conscious choice from AGA members to share and advance the safety of their operations, personnel, and the public. The impact of the program is significant, both for individual companies as well as for the industry as a whole.

For companies that are being reviewed, there are immediate valuable insights that help to direct the company's actions to improve safety and reliability. In addition, those participating in a review are able to observe leading practices being done by the company and bring those practices back to their own company.

AGA has held a workshop for participating companies to highlight some of the leading practices identified during the reviews and to discuss common challenges facing the industry. AGA is currently investigating other options to share leading practices.

Additional Information

The AGA Peer Review Program received the American Society of Association Executive (ASAE) 2015 *Power of A Gold Award*. AGA is currently working on the 2018 – 2020 Peer Review Triennium.

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“The connections formed through the national AGA Peer Review Program will help ensure that local natural gas utilities throughout the nation can continue to enhance their record of excellent, safe and reliable service.”

Christina Sames, Vice President of Operations and Engineering.