Just Culture vs Blame Culture: How We Learn & Improve Fatality File



Four years after double fatality, Houston-area tank cleaning contractor cited for same hazards that claimed another employee's life

What Happened

In December 2023, a 53-year-old employee at Quala Services LLC in La Porte, Texas did not return after his shift. He was found unresponsive inside a tanker he had been cleaning. OSHA investigators determined the employer had failed to conduct atmospheric testing before allowing him to enter. He died from exposure to the hazardous atmosphere inside. This was not the first time. In June 2020, OSHA had cited the same company for the same violations after two workers died under nearly identical circumstances. Three workers from the same employer were now dead from the same preventable hazard — four years apart.

What Went Wrong

The 2020 double fatality was a documented learning opportunity. The company was cited, returned to operations, and continued sending workers into tanks without atmospheric testing. OSHA cited Quala Services for eight repeat violations following the 2023 fatality — meaning these were not new failures but the same documented failures that had already killed twice. The organization processed the citations without processing the lessons.

The Bottom Line

Three workers. Same company. Same hazard. Four years. The information needed to prevent the third death existed after the first. A just culture does not just record what went wrong — it changes what caused it. When organizations treat citations as the end of the process rather than the beginning of learning, the hazard stays in place and the next death is only a matter of time.

Source: Dol.gov