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The Critical Role of Relationships and Trust in Safety Cultures

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Introduction

Have you ever noticed how supervisors who have good relationships with their crews tend to have safer crews? In fact, good relationships tend to be associated with all kinds of good performance. Why would this be so? What do relationships have to do with safety?

Discretionary Effort

The link is discretionary effort. Discretionary effort is that effort which employees can give at work, but don't have to. Discretionary effort is going above the basic requirements, and it rarely occurs in the context of poor employee-management relationships. Many people think of safety as a compliance issue—getting people to comply with safety rules, regulations, and procedures. However, if you want to go beyond compliance and create a high-performance safety culture, discretionary effort is a requirement. Truly exceptional safety requires that people don't just follow procedures, comply with OSHA standards, and wear personal protective equipment (PPE). Exceptional safety happens when people look for and report hazards, give peers feedback on safe and at-risk behavior, and most difficult of all, admit when they have made mistakes so lessons can be learned. You don't get this kind of engagement in safety when employees dislike, distrust, and (most importantly) fear their boss. If people think being honest about a safety infraction will lead to reprimands and discipline, then they won't be open and honest. In other words, you won't get discretionary effort.

Discretionary effort is only created through the use of positive reinforcement. Research shows that when people are recognized for what they do well around safety and when reporting problems and concerns is met with reinforcing consequences (such as joint problem solving and problem resolution), employees will be more engaged in safety.

So what does discretionary effort and positive reinforcement have to do with relationships? Positive reinforcement is disabled by poor relationships. Not only are people less willing to use positive reinforcement within the context of a poor relationship, but when they do, that reinforcement is less effective. If you tell someone they've done a good job and/or try to show concern for their safety, but they dislike you and therefore don't care what you think, your attempts at reinforcement are less likely to be effective.

How Do Poor Relationships Develop?

So how do so many well-intended leaders end up having poor relationships with their direct reports? Most safety management systems are not set up to encourage enough positive reinforcement. Safety has historically been managed largely through negative reinforcement. People are told what the safety procedures, rules and expectations are and then if they violate any of the procedures, rules or expectations they experience negative consequences ranging from negative feedback to discipline. More importantly, when they follow the procedures, rules and expectations—that is when they do things right—they rarely experience positive consequences.

Proportionally speaking, people work safely the vast majority of the time but if you ask most frontline employees they will tell you they only hear about safety when they have done something wrong. This "exception management" approach to safety is destructive of relationships. From the frontline employee's perspective they put effort into working safely. There are many rules and procedures to follow and many of them have naturally punishing consequences (they are more difficult, time consuming, uncomfortable or in other ways a hassle) and employees work to overcome these natural consequences and do the right things—engage in the safe behaviors. This individual effort is largely ignored by management. Safety celebrations and awards rarely acknowledge this effort. What the individual experiences is, in scientific terms, extinction for safe behaviors and punishment for the few at-risk behaviors. If you ask frontline employees, the net effect is resentment and mistrust. From their perspective management either doesn't notice that they work hard to do many safe behaviors every day, or they don't value that hard work, or they can't be bothered to acknowledge it. All of those conclusions erode relationships.

Another contributor to poor relationships is lack of trust. Many things go into trust but behaviorally speaking trust comes down to *doing what you say you will do*. So how might otherwise trustworthy leaders create a lack of trust with their direct reports around safety? Leaders, especially frontline supervisors, get many requests each day from frontline employees. It can be hard to keep track and follow-through on all those requests, but not doing so undermines trust over time. This follow-through is particularly important around hazard mitigation. When employees report hazards or other barriers to safety it is essential that leaders follow-through. That follow-through cannot always be immediate remediation of the hazard of course, but some kind of follow-through is essential. Letting people know what the plan is for remediation, giving them an estimated date of completion or simply being very clear the hazard cannot be remediated are all acceptable forms of follow up. The point is to ensure the person reporting the hazard knows they have been heard and their concern has been taken seriously. Too often these requests get lost either because people get busy and forget about them, they pass them on to others, the requests are awaiting budget approval, etc. Best practice is to have a running record of these requests that is updated regularly with the status of each request. Once items have been taken care

of don't remove them from the list too quickly. Having a list of completed items provides data that demonstrate action and this data can help build trust by letting people know management is following up on reported hazards.

Another important way that trust is undermined is through discipline after incidents. Most accidents and incidents are the result of a combination of root causes. While frontline workers are often the ones who engage in the *final* at-risk behavior, typically multiple upstream at-risk behaviors on the part of management, engineers, and executives contribute as well. A simple example is a frontline employee who fails to put on gloves when handling chemicals and experiences a burn. On the surface it is reasonable to blame the worker if he has been trained and clear expectations have been set that gloves must be used. What we may learn, however, is that the employee has very large hands and only medium-sized gloves are provided, despite his repeated requests for larger sizes. In such cases, when the blame is assigned only to the person at the point of the accident, it is, quite simply, unjust. Frontline workers often feel they are blamed for accidents when circumstances beyond their control (but within the control of management) play a part.

A system that seems unjust or unfair leads to the erosion of trust and respect between management and hourly employees. Lack of trust, created through unfair disciplinary action (perceived or real), erodes the willingness of people to be more engaged. In the words of one hourly employee, "Why should we do any more than we have to in safety? No matter what we do, management will still blame us when there is an accident." Without trust, open and honest discussions about at-risk behavior, near misses, and unsafe conditions will never take place. Without those discussions, risk and exposure cannot be minimized.

In addition to undermining trust, there are other reasons to be cautious with the use of discipline and blame. Research shows that punishing consequences (like discipline) have detrimental side effects that often outweigh any positive benefit. Some side effects include lower morale, lower productivity, decreased teamwork, decreased volunteerism, and suppressed reporting of incidents, accidents, and near misses. Most importantly, discipline often does not result in safety improvement. Thus, it is important to be cautious with the use of discipline and other forms of punishment in safety. We are not suggesting eliminating discipline. It has a place. We do suggest using it with caution.

We also suggest making a shift in the type of accountability used post-incident. After an incident there is always a call to find out who is responsible and hold them accountable. This too often becomes about finding blame—finding the individual who made the mistake, and delivering punishment. As noted previously, there are many downsides to such action. Blaming and punishing seldom result in a safer workplace and usually has a detrimental effect on relationships and trust. A better approach is to focus accountability efforts on prevention. The accountability should be focused around making changes—building safe habits and a safe physical environment—that will prevent a recurrence, not on punishing those who made the mistake. This kind of accountability will positively contribute to safety and will build trust and better relationships.

When responding to incidents and accidents, the primary goal is (or should be) to ensure that similar incidents do not happen again. However, too often, after the investigation is done, the appropriate parties have been disciplined, and any damage repaired, there is often spotty follow-

through on the action items identified to prevent a reoccurrence. Concrete action items such as repairing a piece of equipment have a high probability of completion. It is the less-tangible action items such as changing supervisory practices, modifying processes for ensuring better engineering designs, and encouraging peer feedback around behaviors that lead to incidents, for which accountability often falls apart. This is precisely the accountability that should be the focus. Holding the appropriate parties accountable for fixing the behavioral conditions that lead to the incident should be of primary concern.

Building Better Relationships

Having a good relationship doesn't mean being nice all the time or being soft on safety. Good relationships at work include accountability and constructive feedback. They are also not about being friends with direct reports or being someone they want to go to a ball game with. A positive relationship isn't necessarily about your personality characteristics. In other words, you don't have to be outgoing, overly friendly, or the life of the party to establish yourself as a sincere, positive, and fair manager or leader. Positive employee-management relationships include mutual trust and respect as a foundation for a partnership around safety or any other optimal job performance.

So how does a boss develop a good relationship with direct reports? Listed below are behaviors that consistently contribute to positive workplace relationships. These behaviors can be exhibited by any "personality type" and can lead to improvements in safety and work in general.

<u>Best Practices for Building Effective Relationships around Safety</u>

1. Set clear expectations.
   - Use pinpointed (actionable words) to ensure clarity of expectations; avoid assumptions and ask recipient(s) to state an understanding of the expectations.
2. Listen.
   - Use active listening skills such as maintaining eye contact, using appropriate facial expressions, paraphrasing, and asking questions to demonstrate understanding. Avoid looking at or using computers and smart phones when others are talking to you.
3. Acknowledge good work, not just mistakes/problems.
   - Track the nature of your interactions. Good leaders maintain a higher ratio of positive to constructive comments/discussions.
4. Ask questions to understand problems/issues.
   - Avoid jumping to conclusions. There is always more to every story. Ask questions to uncover the details.
5. Ask for feedback about your own effectiveness and areas for improvement.
   - Seek detailed information about what you do well and what you need to do differently to be more effective.
   - Demonstrate that you are listening and working to improve your own actions.
6. Avoid blame.
   - People's behavior makes sense to them, even if it doesn't make sense to you. Find out what antecedents and consequences were in place that led to undesired behavior.
7. Respond fairly to incidents (safety and other types).
   - Better incident investigations will lead to fair responses.

- Better understanding of behavior will also lead to fair responses.

8. Admit when you make mistakes.
   - Acknowledging your own mistakes helps establish that mistakes are expected and that learning from them is critical.
9. Solicit input and opinions from direct reports.
   - Asking for input and advice will lead to better solutions, and in many cases will also demonstrate respect.
10. Follow through on commitments.
    - Consistent follow-through is essential for building trust and respect. Use whatever memory devices you need to be sure to do what you say you will do.
11. Stand up for direct reports; "go to bat" for them.
    - Verbally promote direct reports and share their successes with others. In addition, acknowledge some responsibility when direct reports make mistakes.
12. Remove roadblocks in order to set direct reports up for success.
    - The number-one job of management is to make direct reports successful. Analyze what gets in their way and do what you can to remove obstacles.
13. Provide feedback that helps direct reports improve.
    - Pinpointed, timely feedback is most helpful. Don't save feedback for annual appraisals or even monthly one-on-one meetings; just-in-time feedback is the most effective.
14. Demonstrate that you trust direct reports.
    - Give employees appropriate responsibilities and avoid micromanaging. When appropriate, tell them you trust them, and reinforce trustworthy behaviors.
15. Treat direct reports like people, not just employees.
    - Make a point to greet direct reports at the start of the shift (when possible); show an interest in their lives outside of work, and demonstrate concern and consideration.

Clearly, these so-called "soft skills" are well worth developing because they result in greater engagement, more discretionary effort and thus a safer workplace. As mentioned above, safety management systems often do not promote the development of good relationships. The "exception management" focus on what is wrong, the poor follow through on hazards and other safety concerns, and the misuse of discipline and accountability in safety are all a product of the safety systems that are established within organizations. Changing the systems can facilitate behavior change. That said if we expect management to actively work on building better relationships—to work on some of the skills listed above—then we must hold them accountable for doing so.

Organizations that understand the value of good relationships do hold their managers and supervisors accountable for the behaviors associated with good relationships and they reap the benefits in safety and beyond. When employees are listened to, recognized for the good things they do, and treated like valued members of the team they will give their discretionary effort toward making your organization more successful and safe.