

Employee Engagement Strategies for Implementation of a Safety Management System

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Introduction

One of the key components of a successful Safety Management System (SMS) is a high degree of employee engagement. Front line employees are often an untapped resource when organizations are rolling out management systems. They often have skills outside of their day-to-day job tasks that can be successfully leveraged to implement and continuously improve the SMS. Engagement in safety gives employees the opportunity to showcase skills that they might not typically use in the workplace. Affording employees these types of opportunities can shift the safety culture to employee ownership of their workplace environment and improve overall job satisfaction. This paper will discuss some creative employee engagement strategies used by L.L.Bean, Inc. that can be transferable to other organizations who are implementing Safety Management Systems.

Safety Management System concept

There are currently three major voluntary safety and health management systems for use by general industry. They are the: Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) Voluntary Protection Program (VPP), British Standards Institute (BSI) Occupational Health and Safety Assessment Specification (OHSAS) 18,001 and the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) Occupational Health and Safety Management Systems Z-10. The Principles of Management Systems are the same no matter what business function is applied. The key is the methodical and systematic control of business processes, in order to achieve high quality and productivity. This is the basis of the Deming circle or cycle from the Total Quality Management movement. In his 1982 book, *Out of the Crisis*, W. Edwards Deming challenged that companies needed to create an overarching business environment that emphasized improvement of products and services over short-term financial goals. He believed that if management adhered to such a philosophy, various aspects of business—ranging from training to system improvement to manager-worker relationships—would become far healthier and, ultimately, more profitable (Deming, 2000). Deming applied his concepts to quality but they are just as relevant to safety and health. (Petersen 226, 255).

OSHA's VPP will be used here to illustrate the types of engagement strategies that can be used during the implementation and maintenance of any Safety Management System. VPP consists of four primary elements: Management Leadership and Employee Involvement; Worksite Analysis; Hazard Prevention and Control; and Safety and Health Training. While all elements are important to a successful implementation of an SMS, employee involvement (and engagement) is the way to change the safety culture and sustain an SMS on a long term basis.

Engagement Strategies

The engagement of employees starts with committed management. A company will not be successful with employee engagement unless the employees believe that management is truly committed to safety. Employees must see first-hand that their efforts actually make a difference. Overcoming employee skepticism can be one of the most difficult hurdles. It takes consistent actions on the part of all members of management to prove to the employees that this is not just lip service; management is serious about safety and wants their help. Once a company overcomes this hurdle, the employee engagement can become infectious.

There are many ways a company can approach employee engagement. The important thing is to select strategies that are a good fit for the workforce. Strategies used in a warehouse environment might be very different than strategies used in an office environment. Below are some employee engagement activities that have been successful in various work environments.

Safety Management System Kick-off Events

Once a site decides to begin the journey to implement an SMS, this information must be shared with the employees. This is the first opportunity for Management to show their commitment and solicit employee engagement. A kickoff event can be used to inform all site employees of the overall plans in a creative way. Each L.L.Bean site has done this differently but every kick-off event has been high energy and creative. Imagine a pep rally atmosphere with balloons, music and food. One team developed a DVD that introduced VPP and then included an audience participation game to energize the employees. Another had employees from other internal company VPP sites talk about their experience and how it changed the way they thought about their own safety and that of their coworkers. Our latest site included a fashion show using employees as safety role "models". Employees adorned in the latest personal protective equipment pranced down a "catwalk" lined with orange safety cones to the cheers of their fellow employees. The event ended with a ribbon cutting ceremony paving the way into the new safety culture. Employees were asked to signify their willingness to commit to a safe work environment by signing a banner. Say goodbye to boring safety training! The entire event was put together and executed by a group of frontline employees from the distribution operation.

Employee Based Safety Teams

Numerous resources are needed to implement the elements of an SMS. Targeted safety teams are a great way to distribute the workload and engage employees in workplace safety. One of L.L.Bean's largest divisions is accomplishing this through multiple employee safety teams. While many companies utilize a general safety committee, having targeted safety teams provide opportunities for employees to develop specific skills in one area of the SMS. Employees may not be interested in being on a general safety committee; however, dividing up the work into targeted

teams has proven to spark the interest of employees who might not otherwise be engaged in safety. A good example of this is employees with passion and skills around first aid and emergency medical response are excited to use and expand these skills as part of a Goodheart Team (L.L.Bean's first responders for medical emergencies).

Employee safety teams exist for standard safety elements such as self-inspections, incident investigations, hazard abatement, emergency preparedness and training. In addition, several teams are in place for some non-traditional safety programs such as stretch break leaders and wellness initiatives. Each team requires a variety of skills and talents that may be outside of a front line employee's day-to-day job tasks. Members are solicited in a similar manner as a job opening. Employees are given equal opportunity to "apply" to fill openings on teams and must submit a letter of interest. Once selected, the employee is provided with the appropriate training to be a successful, active contributor. Employee safety teams include a front line leader to guide and support the team in their activities along with charters that outline their responsibilities and authority.

A non-traditional safety team, Clean Sweep, originated as a creative way to address ongoing housekeeping issues, clutter, and outdated or broken equipment that had accumulated over the years in some of the warehousing facilities. Employees interested in housekeeping and organization are given time each week to "sweep" the building section by section to organize, clean, and dispose of items that are no longer needed in the work environment. Once the building is swept clean, the team continues their efforts by periodic repeating their "clean sweep" or taking on projects such as cleaning fans. Clean sweep team members generate awareness around the importance of housekeeping amongst their peers resulting in a cleaner, safer work environment.

Themes

Another popular way to generate energy around employee engagement is through the use of themed initiatives particularly relating to current entertainment or sports events. VPP Survivor was a popular activity for employees to create "tribes" and compete in safety challenges for the coveted safety idol to display in their work area. It not only improved safety but instilled camaraderie to a level that hadn't been seen in years.

Other successful themed activities have included the Amazing Race to VPP, Safety Jeopardy, the Olympics and Wheel of Fortune hosted by "Pat Safejak" and "VPP Vannah" where employees spun the wheel and solved safety messages.

Competitions

In most companies, a level of competitiveness exists between work groups. Safety scavenger hunts have successfully been used to create a fun, friendly competition amongst works groups. There can be so much fun going on that people don't always realize they are learning about safety. Who doesn't want to be the first one to find out what the spill procedure is for the cleaning chemical or what the injury rate is for the division from a published company safety report?

One competition included coming up with a team mascot. The mascots were subsequently "kidnapped" and used to refresh employees on how to conduct an emergency evacuation. A mascot took on the role of evacuation leader, donned a reflective safety vest, obtained an emergency radio and bull horn, and followed procedures to ensure all mascots were safely

evacuated. The evacuation was photographed and used as a refresher display for employees on how to properly evacuate. An evacuation drill never received so much attention!

Training & Communications

Annual safety training can be very dry and boring. How do you engage employees to pay attention to refresher training? How about a grass roots movie produced and edited by employees? At one site, a front line employee had a side business of making short horror films and taught the other employees who volunteered how to story board their ideas into a cohesive training video. They consulted the OSHA regulations and made sure the information provided was compliant and then added best practices. A final check by the Corporate Safety staff found no errors in the content! Another site's safety training "movie" included a segment on two employees reading and discussing MSDS sheets as they sat by the pool and a building evacuation led by Sponge Bob. Invite employees to the "movies", serve popcorn and enjoy the show. Employees were lining up to get seats to the latest showing!

Process and Building Redesigns

Employee engagement doesn't always have to involve a method of entertainment. A good example of this is involving employees who actually do the job in redesign and process changes. With a little guidance, they are your best resource for coming up with the most efficient and safest way to do a job. L.L.Bean witnessed this when the ski and bike assembly processes with several ergonomic issues were relocated from one building to another. Employees performing the job were given the opportunity to play a major role in the design and layout at the new location. The end result was dramatic improvement to the process and productivity. It also helped for a smooth transition, which is not always the case when major changes occur in the work environment.

Preparing for the Audit

Implementation of any SMS requires an onsite audit to evaluate the site's processes and condition in comparison to the standards. A part of audit preparations is to ensure that employees are knowledgeable about safety programs and are able to articulate that knowledge if interviewed by the auditors, such as the OSHA team. Employees have come up with interesting ways to bring all the training together for their peers to feel confident in an interview. One site developed "Pass the Baton" in which batons similar to those in relay races were created with potential interview questions on one side with an appropriate answer on the other. One employee would approach another with the baton and engage in a discussion about the question on the baton. That employee who received the baton continued the education by passing it on and engaging in a discussion about what they just learned with the next employee. Employees were not only students in this learning but also teachers as they passed on what they learned to the next employee.

Another successful method was the Safety VPP Carnival. The training area was decorated with a big top, peanuts and popcorn were served, and carnival music was played to set the stage for a fun, interactive learning event. Employees went through a series of booths where they played safety scrabble, fished for acronyms, spun a twister board to see which stretch they had to demonstrate, participated in a mock OSHA interview, played a who's who game, and numerous other fun carnival activities all with a safety theme. Another site had fun with a demonstration of a good OSHA interview vs. a bad OSHA interview. You can have a lot of fun exaggerating what "not to say"!

Employee Presentations

Since employee involvement is so key to a successful SMS, there is nothing more powerful than employees conducting presentations for the OSHA team during the on-site audit or at professional development conferences. OSHA may expect traditional formal Power Point presentations from company leadership, which is certainly acceptable. However, why not make your company stand out and take advantage of this opportunity to showcase employee involvement efforts? You can amaze an audit team by turning these presentations over to employees. Skits, testimonials, songs, videos and storybooks have all wowed OSHA audit teams and are a fun way to lighten the atmosphere of the audit. The site should ensure that the employee presentations contain an appropriate safety educational message and are not just a source of entertainment.

Conclusion

There are many types of strategies that can be utilized for employees to be meaningfully engaged and influence safety decisions in the work place. Providing employees with a variety of opportunities will increase employee engagement. Employee engagement provides leadership with a broader pool of safety resources and gives the employees the opportunity to own and be accountable for safety in their workplace. Start out small, do a needs assessment, and identify where your organization can benefit from increased employee engagement. You might be surprised at the talent and skills that already exist within your front line employees. Leverage those employees to improve workplace safety; you'll create a safer work environment AND increase job satisfaction amongst employees who get to show off their "hidden" talents. There's also a strong likelihood of increased productivity as an indirect benefit of engaged, satisfied employees!

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