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Engaging the Supplemental Workforce – A Contractor Viewpoint

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Introduction

For the past 19 years the author has been involved with monitoring the safety performance of supplemental workers, assisting supplemental workers at customer locations, or directly managing supplemental workers. In all cases, whether providing oversight as the "customer" or as the "contractor," the greatest hurdle to developing positive safety performance was engagement.

The struggle, in the author's experience, has typically been the management team – customer and/or contractor – asking, how do we get the workers involved in the process? How do we get the workers to own their safety? How do we change or improve the existing safety culture? How do we get people *ENGAGED*?

While this paper will focus on these questions as they pertain to the engagement of individual workers, we will also explore possibilities that we, as the owners and contractors, need to develop a firm foundation of "engagement" very early in the process of assuming a new contract relationship.

Contract Award / Mobilization

Engagement of the supplemental work force begins even before one worker is hired in the field. "Engagement" begins at home. Organizational value statements that place safety at the top of the list set the tone and clearly identify executive leadership expectations.

Engagement of the work force will then roll into the bid process. Early in this process the contractor will begin looking at available staff and supervisory personnel to assign, should they win the contract. This is a critical step that often fails to get much attention. It is imperative that the EH&S Manager assigned to the project knows and understands the Operations team that will be assigned to execute work at the customer location. Identification of the key players early in the process will promote a smoother transition upon contract award.

Individual personalities are not the key focus at this point. What is key is that open and honest communication exists between the support groups (EH&S, Quality, etc) and the Operations team. They must work together to develop a detailed mobilization plan and decide on division of labor in order to create a well organized effort. This is especially critical if the contract is of the multi-site or multi-location variety.

Upon successful award of a contract and prior to actually mobilizing the work location, the EH&S Manager assigned to the project must make initial contacts with the customer EH&S Management team. While this initial contact is very often an initial introduction, there are some extremely important items that need to be identified:

1. Customer contacts, including name, contact numbers and title.
2. Communication of company safety philosophy to the customer. This must be a constant and consistent message.
3. Customer safety policies and procedures. Even if the contract spells out which policies (customer or contractor) will be enforced, there is often conflict. A gap assessment needs to be completed to identify process/procedure conflicts and resolution. This must be shared with the Operations team as early in the process as possible.
4. Available facilities.
5. Resources to be supplied by the customer or subcontracted.
6. Identification of local treatment facilities. This is a good time to ask the customer what their experience is with local treatment facilities.
7. Industrial Hygiene support services.

Boots on the Ground

Once the team arrives at the new work location, the real work begins. At this point the EH&S Manager and the Operations team will typically get their first face-to-face opportunities with the new customer.

This is the next step to engaging the supplemental workforce – building relationships between the customer and contractor. This is another critical point in the engagement process. Both teams need to work together, develop a communication path, ensure they understand contract terms and work in the same direction.

At this point, the EH&S Manager should have all of the available information and resources to develop a solid Safety Orientation for use as the supplemental workers are either hired or rolled over from the previous contractor. At all costs try to avoid a “new sheriff in town” approach to mobilizing the job.

Developing Core Staff

Whether staffing a multiple site or single site contract, staffing of EH&S personnel is vital. In order to assemble a strong team, there needs to be buy-in from the internal customer (your Operations team) and buy-in from the external customer. The individual(s) chosen to fill the site EH&S roles must have the ability to develop relationships with you, the management team, the customer and the craft. The most educated, certified and qualified individual may not be a good fit for a particular contract or a specific site location. The EH&S Manager must determine which skill sets are the most critical for success:

1. Advanced education or degree?
2. Professional Certification?
3. Communication Skills, including the ability to listen?
4. Strong field person?
5. Analytic in nature?
6. People- person?

Building Relationships

The field EH&S Professional must be able to develop positive working relationships with their internal customers. This does not mean that the safety department and operations need to agree all of the time. Open and honest communication is vital. Consistency is critical. Trust is an absolute!

The EH&S Professional(s) also need to develop positive working relationships with a wide variety of external customers to ensure success:

1. Customer EH&S personnel.
2. Customer Site Management.
3. Other Contractors.
4. Medical treatment personnel.
5. Workers Compensation personnel.

Engaging the Craft

As you can see, there are many aspects of engagement that need to be addressed before we hire one craft person on the job. The process to this point may have taken weeks, or even months, to accomplish. It is at this juncture that the real challenges arise.

In many cases, the new contractor will simply "roll" the existing craft workforce over from one payroll to another. This will present many challenges and is the first opportunity to engage the craft work force. This is also a very difficult time, depending on the size of the work force, to undergo transition. Problems in the payroll process will have a huge impact on worker morale and motivation.

How do we manage this change? First, it is important to understand that the workers will be facing a great deal of uncertainty. While this is a business opportunity for the contractor, this may be a life event for the individual worker. You must be aware of how long workers have been at this location, either with the previous contractor or a number of previous contractors. There will be issues of trust initially – trust *is* an issue and does affect safety performance. It is critical that the contractor earn the trust of the work force.

At times there will be additional obstacles to overcome. Attitudes among the work force that "we'll still be here after you're gone" and "it's the way it's always been" are very difficult to manage. Geographical differences can be challenging. What is the local culture? Are there local or regional accents or speech patterns?

In order to meet these challenges, there are a number of things that can be done to ease the transition and earn the trust of the work force:

1. Develop training and programs specific to site needs.
2. Utilize supplemental workers as safety observers.
3. Conduct specialty training to identify required behavior; such as company-specific Job Safety Analysis training or Behavior Observation training. We even developed a training program entitled, "The Way That It's Always Been – Why it Can't Be."
4. Develop a Safety Champion, Safety Scout or similar program to get employee's involved in the safety process.
5. Develop a recognition and reward program to identify those groups or individuals who choose safe behaviors – *Not* a safety incentive program based on reporting or record keeping criteria.
6. Establish minimum standards and enforce them consistently and constantly.

Working Together for Success

Some of the key points to engaging the supplemental workforce relate directly to how well the contractor and the customer developed partnering relationships. The terms partner and partnership are important. These terms imply unity and inclusion and help set the tone with craft workers. It is also important that we, both customer and contractor, are in the business for the same reasons and working together to resolve challenges is beneficial to both organizations and sends positive overtones to the line work force.

Here are some key concepts to consider:

1. The contractor has two entities to please; the customer and their own organization. This creates huge challenges to engagement at all levels.
2. The contractor brings a wealth of industry experience to the table:
    a. First hand knowledge of Best Practices.
    b. Sharing of Lessons Learned from across the industry.
3. The contractor and customer EH&S teams need to work together and be seen interacting in the field.
4. While the contractors success (or failure) is typically judged by numbers; i.e. OSHA rates, DART rates, etc, the most important thing we must all remember is that each of those numbers represents real people experiencing real injuries.

Conclusion

Engaging the supplemental work force goes much deeper than just trying to get the craft workers involved in the safety process and takes much more than "flavor of the month" programs to generate interest. The contractor must develop good working relationships with both internal and external customers. Consideration must be given early in the process to identify the proper people to staff EH&S positions to provide the best opportunity for success.

Customer and contractor EH&S personnel must work together for the common good, be seen by workers interacting in the field and collaborate to identify gaps and implement long-term training and process improvements that provide for craft involvement in the safety process. The development of leading indicators that measure behaviors and process compliance will help in identifying those gaps or weaknesses that exist, rather than just relying on lagging indicators.

Engagement must begin before contract award and continue through the life of the contract. Knee-jerk approaches to emergent issues typically fail to identify long-term, meaningful change, can create cost issues and take focus away from other critical initiatives. What is needed is well thought-out, early management interventions to take action on those gaps identified using leading indicators.

“Engagement begins at home.”