

# ESTABLISHING A SAFETY CULTURE: Getting Started

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In some settings, safety practitioners may find an environment in which safety is not appreciated. In fact, some employees or fellow managers may even be hostile toward safety.

Such a situation recently arose at a North Carolina factory, as recounted by a graduate student working as an occupational safety intern. The student was developing a lockout/tagout procedure when he encountered an uncooperative front-line supervisor.

"On Friday, I had to meet with the maintenance supervisor," the student said. "He was not happy to see me and was very uncooperative. He said that this stuff [meaning safety] was useless and that I did not know what I was doing. He was not going to write anything down nor was he going to get me a list of machinery. Obviously, that did not go well. I have advised my supervisor and the manager of human resources that this supervisor is to be informed in advance before I approach him with my assignments. To date, I have been the one to inform him of safety matters—and the one who has attempted to elicit his cooperation."

## **What basic steps should be followed to establish a positive safety culture where one does not exist?**

When the intern approached management about the problem, the response was not unexpected. "We haven't had a serious accident here in 20 years. Why should we change anything?" Clearly, site management had no concept of what was happening throughout the organization with respect to safety. It appears no one noticed—or cared about—safety issues.

In any organization, line management has ultimate responsibility for safety. Any actions taken or problems solved should be a result of line management intervention. If this group does not take safety seriously, positive change cannot occur. When faced with an attitude problem or a poor safety culture, how should the safety manager respond? What can improve such a situation? What steps should be followed to establish a positive safety culture where one does not currently exist?

### **STEP ONE: PROVE THAT A PROBLEM EXISTS**

First, line management must realize that a problem exists—and that it is a management responsibility, not a safety department responsibility. If management perceives no problem—real or potential—it will see no reason to solve it.

One effective strategy is to highlight the potential for losses. This requires doing some homework. Because safety competes with all other entities within the organization for resources, the safety manager must understand what factors affect the cost of operations (Brandt 22). In addition, the safety manager must understand—and be able to demonstrate—the dollar benefit of all safety-related expenditures. Cost accountants are a good resource for such a project.

One key will be to demonstrate that a strong safety program is almost like an insurance policy—except that safety activities should be proactive, not reactive. For example, most managers would never permit the motor fleet or real estate to go uninsured. Although the risk to one piece of property over a brief period of time is low, the potential for loss is extremely high; for a relatively small premi-

um, a large amount of protection can be obtained. Similarly, for a relatively small dollar outlay, many steps can be taken to prevent injury and property loss.

How much is such prevention worth? Actual dollar amounts are assigned by multiplying the likely potential loss in a given category by the probability of the loss occurring in that year (Friend 36). Although a given probability, such as a fire or windstorm loss, may be minuscule, when combined with all probabilities in all categories where safety programs exist, it is substantial.

Real dollar amounts can and will be saved with the judicious application of a strong safety program. Losses incurred through workers' compensation (WC) or other insurance premium increases are direct evidence that can be used to substantiate the case for safety. Monies spent due to property losses are usually less evident, but they can also help justify the need to create and maintain a strong safety program. (Some companies do not track property-loss-only expenditures, so it may be necessary to establish a cost accounting system to do so.)

#### **STEP TWO: GAIN MANAGEMENT SUPPORT**

The second step is to obtain clear management support for safety and the safety program. This should include a written document of endorsement—signed by the CEO and distributed throughout the firm. In most cases, one cannot simply walk into the CEO's office, request and receive such a document. Besides, the ultimate goal is true commitment, not mere lip service. To gain such commitment, the safety manager must demonstrate cost benefits of a strong safety program.

Executives who are committed to safety understand its full cost benefits; they understand the total costs of each accident, as well as the amount of revenue it requires to recoup those costs. Committed executives realize that even off-the-job injuries can affect the bottom line. Such commitment is only possible if the safety professional makes a strong case based on his/her own understanding of cost benefits. Best advice: Make the dollar case, then solicit commitment.

Commitment means that members of the management team meet with employees to discuss the document and take action to demonstrate their commitment to safety. Managers agree to abide by the document and vigorously participate in all aspects of the safety program.

A series of rewards and punishments should be built into the system in order to ensure that all employees produce and work safely. Sanctions that apply to everyone—including all managers—should be established and enforced. Violations of safety rules and regulations should not be tolerated.

A strong reward system for practicing safety should also be developed. This does not mean that a safety incentive program or some safety gimmick should be devised. It means that managers and workers should be evaluated relative to safety just as they are evaluated relative to production.

Examples of safety performance evaluation schemes are prevalent; the safety manager should select the one which best rewards employees for working safely. In the authors' opinion, giving merit to teams that have zero accidents or no lost-time injuries may lead to cover-up and a less-than-adequate safety reporting system. In some cases, such schemes can create legal liabilities as well because recordable incidents may go unreported.

#### **STEP THREE: ESTABLISH CRITICAL CONTROLS**

The next step is to establish controls at critical points in the operation. This consists of three steps: 1) Establish standards. 2) Monitor deviations. 3) Correct performance based on results of monitoring.

Standards must be in line with management goals. Focusing on areas that provide no cost benefits—or do not match management goals—can lead to wasted effort. Thus, one must identify and concentrate on key areas relative to overall management goals and potential dollar savings. Care must be taken to include those areas that have a low probability of loss, yet a high potential cost should loss occur.

A safety professional's success largely depends on management's perception of safety's contribution to overall corporate goals. For example, if management expects lower accident totals or an improved WC modification rate, then the safety professional's performance will likely be judged on how well those tasks are accomplished.

In addition, management is often predisposed toward its desires. For example, some authors suggest that a zero lost workday goal is reasonable (Nelson 41). If management buys into such an ideal, it will likely become the basis against which the safety professional's performance is measured.

In "What Measures Should We Use and Why," Petersen suggests that numbers of accidents, frequency rates, severity rates and dollar expenditures are ineffective measures of safety success because attainment of decreases in those measures is simply a matter of luck (Petersen 37). In the authors' opinion, it is dangerous to dismiss these indicators as matters of chance. Both legal entities and management depend on such statistics as indicators of safety performance—whether or not the safety professional wishes to use them. If these figures suggest poor performance, it may cost the safety professional his/her job.

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# The safety manager must understand— and be able to demonstrate—the dollar benefit of all safety-related expenditures.

In some cases, the safety professional may be able to convince management that other, less-traditional indicators, such as periodic work area inspections or sampling supervisor training, are more useful than traditional measures (Petersen 40). However, such success will likely only be temporary—lasting only until the company is pressured by an outside agency, such as an insurance carrier or OSHA, for information or improvements in the traditional measures.

Therefore, the best rule of thumb is to be realistic in selecting measures. Bottom line: Success is measured in terms of dollars and cost benefit. Traditional indicators demonstrate safety's contribution to management. Non-traditional indicators can then be used to verify the accuracy of traditional indicators and to measure the effectiveness of an individual manager's contributions to the safety effort.

#### STEP FOUR: SAFETY IN PERFORMANCE REVIEW

Safety must be incorporated into any system used to evaluate individual performance. All personnel—managers and employees alike—must become accustomed to being evaluated on safety as well as production. This can be achieved in various ways; the key is to establish standards of performance in safety similar to those for other functions of the enterprise.

As noted, management often looks for certain indicators. For example, managers may want to see reductions in lost-time incidents or dollars spent on WC. If a manager's success is based on how s/he performs in such areas, management may be convinced to build other indicators into the formula.

However, one should not stop there. The next step is to look for correlations between these indicators and numbers that are meaningful to management. This is no short-term fix. It may take several years to see correlations. For example, Goldberg suggests measuring events, such as how many safety meetings a given supervisor conducts or attends (38). Attending safety meetings may or may not affect how effective the supervisor is relative to safety. The apparent assumption is, "Throw enough safety at an individual and s/he will become more safety conscious and impart that consciousness to others."

Whether true or not, the best guideline is to measure areas where improvement is desired and seek ways to correlate that

information with other measurable behavior, such as attendance at safety meetings. If using empirical evidence to measure safety, one must verify that the information being sought is accurate and truly indicative of success.

If measuring numbers of accidents, incidents, first-aid cases or other factors believed to be direct indicators of safety, one cannot assume that workers lie to make themselves look good. Furthermore, the system must include provisions that discourage deception and reward complete disclosure; this way, employees will clearly understand that nonreporting will not be tolerated. In addition, employees should be rewarded for suggesting improvements and for devising creative ways to make the workplace safer. Management must listen to employee input and indicate whether employee suggestions will be implemented. Management must also strive to change the system in order to improve operations, not to discourage reporting.

Once such a system is in place, steps must be taken to ensure strict adherence to established standards and to monitor performance via incidental and scheduled performance reviews. Those who do not adhere must be placed into the "negative" part of the system.

Employees who do not meet the appropriate standards of performance in safety are handled just as those who do not meet standards of performance in production. The result may be poor performance evaluations, discipline or, perhaps, termination. Those who participate are rewarded just as top production performers are rewarded. This means positive performance evaluations in the area of safety and recognition for a job well done.

#### CONCLUSION

Maintaining the system described is a challenge. To do so effectively, a series of safety programs must be established, based on identified priorities. Most companies establish mandatory programs (e.g., lockout/tagout, fire prevention, hearing conservation) first. Other programs might cover waste minimization, security or specific problem areas.

Each program must be evaluated annually in order to assess how well the program is working and what needs to be improved. Constant improvement should be the ultimate goal. In addition, the safety manager must consistently evaluate all

factors from a cost-benefit standpoint. Do safety activities add value to the product and the company? How do they contribute to the enterprise and how valuable is that contribution? Are the implemented programs making a difference?

Establishing a safety culture takes time—and it can be a tedious process. It can also be a process that is highly valued. It is up to the safety professional to repeatedly demonstrate that value. Each entity within the organization must understand the value of safety. Ensuring that top management understands the value that safety adds is the first step. ■

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