



Ensure That Your Supervisors And Managers Are Seen As Allies of Safety

In the hundreds of safety program evaluations conducted over many years, we have found that surveyed employees and safety professionals alike often point to “management commitment” as a significant weakness or barrier to improvement. This outcome is puzzling. Clearly, managers and supervisors are not oblivious to the human and economic cost of injuries. They work with these issues regularly, if not daily. Why is it, then, that their “commitment” to safety continues to be an issue with the work force?

Sources of Perception

Perceptions about management commitment are shaped by worker’s interactions with their immediate supervisor and perhaps with that person’s immediate supervisor. Most people interact with the immediate supervisor much more often than they do with the company’s CEO, and their beliefs about what is really important come from those frequent interactions. Even if the CEO visits a site and walks the shop floor to talk with people about safety, that is likely to be an infrequent event for any individual worker. As a factor that shapes shop floor behavior, the CEO’s visit is less influential than the daily instructions and demands coming from immediate supervisors.

Supervisor Influence

First-line supervisors are not oblivious to safety. They personally understand the impact of a serious injury. To them, the injured worker is an individual, not merely a statistic. Given this fact, one might think that first-line supervisors would be the strongest natural allies for safety. However, the fact is that although supervisors have a keen interest in safety, at many sites supervisors do not have the tools they need to make them effective allies of safety.

Those of us who have worked in first-line supervisory positions understand that in many ways this can be the most difficult job in any organization. First-line supervisors are at the end of the chain, which puts them on the receiving end of pressures and demands for performance of many kinds – not just safety performance. In responding to this tug-of-war of contrasting pressures, first-line supervisors strongly influence the safety climate in ways that are usually not apparent to them.

To optimize safety performance and give it its proper place in the mix with productivity and quality, supervisors need new tools. However, only a few organizations have recognized this need. Those companies have established a behavior-based mechanism to help managers and supervisors harness their natural inclination and become effective allies of safety improvement.

Behavior-based Tools for Managers and Supervisors

These days, most people think of behavior-based safety in connection with wage-roll-centered initiatives for improving shop-floor safety-related behaviors. Those behavior-based safety processes have been very successful in many organizations, but they are not the only tools in the toolbox. Not realizing this, over the years other organizations have steered away from behavior-based safety in the belief that they were “not ready for it.”

Often this judgment is based on the perceived absence of management commitment to safety and the recognition that a process based on worker involvement is more likely to succeed in an atmosphere of cooperation and trust about safety issues. Those organizations then struggle to find ways to address their management commitment, trust and cooperation issues. What they often fail to recognize is that the answer to their problem lies in working directly with the management practices of their supervisors and managers. Those practices are also very effectively addressed with behavior-based tools and principles.



Identifying Key Management Practices

The starting point of this approach is to identify key management practices. These management practices are the observable actions performed by supervisors – in other words, behaviors. Key management practices are the ones that influence how the work force perceives the company's commitment to safety, and beyond. Key management practices most deeply influence organization citizenship behavior. Identifying key practices is an important first step toward the goal of increasing the frequency of management practices that support safety and reducing the impact of management practices that undermine safety.

To achieve this goal, we carefully review existing safety programs to assess the objectives of each program, the practices that support those objectives, and barriers to those supportive practices.

A team of supervisors and managers then uses appropriate analytical tools to develop a checklist of key management practices and a common language that describes those practices operationally. In addition, the team adapts one or more of the following methods of collecting data and giving feedback on the identified key practices:

- 360° feedback
- Direct observation
- Formalized self-observation

360° feedback

Once the key management practices have been identified and communicated to managers and supervisors, the organization needs a mechanism to foster their adoption and use. The best way to do this is to collect ongoing data on use of the key practices and to provide reinforcement for using them. The most effective way to collect this data and provide the feedback depends on the specific work situation. In some cases, a 360° feedback process is most effective. In this approach, the manager or supervisor is thought of as being at the center of a circle of feedback – hence the name 360° feedback. Most sites use this approach only annually or semi-annually, since it is difficult and time-consuming to gather data.

Direct Observation and Feedback

Since annual or semi-annual feedback is generally not sufficient for establishing new key practices, other sites use direct ongoing observation of managers and supervisors by designated observers. Those observers, who may be from any level in the company, are trained to observe objectively and to give managers and supervisors frequent feedback on their performance.

Formalized Self-observation

In still other cases, a formalized self-observation process is most appropriate to the specific conditions. In that approach, supervisors and managers are trained to observe, measure, and report on their own performance of the identified key practices. The crucial thing that these approaches have in common is that they supply the organization with a behavior-change mechanism that helps supervisors and managers be effective and successful at developing their influence as allies of safety.

Accountability

An accountability system is another important factor in an initiative to establish key management practices. This system monitors management and supervisory performance of key safety-related practices. Such a system is required by the jobs that supervisors and middle managers do.

Supervisors and managers already have accountability tools to help them reach their targets or goals



in productivity, cost control and quality assurance, for example. They need equally effective accountability systems for safety – a field in which the only measure most managers and supervisors have is the downstream (trailing) indicator of the injury rate. When managers and supervisors are faced with powerful leading indicators in their other daily functions (production, quality, and cost control), the inadequacy of injury rates means that they are strongly tempted to work on productivity and quality issues first.

Over time, this sort of prioritizing can leave the impression that managers and supervisors are putting safety last. What is needed, of course, is not to put productivity or quality last, but instead to make sure that safety is seen as occupying a suitably more prominent place in the balance of activities pursued by managers and supervisors. Companies that are safety leaders are addressing this important issue by installing a safety management practice accountability system.

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