



the Supervisor connection

Safety directors can earn support for safety efforts

By Karen Gaspers, associate editor



Photo: Image100/ People in Industry

Face it: You need their buy-in. Front-line supervisors, that is. Supervisors are vital to safety efforts because they are more influential with workers than the safety professional, and because they have to enforce policies even when you aren't around to ensure they do. Yet supervisors come at all levels of commitment – some are go-getters; others drag their feet.

For the less-than-enthusiastic crowd, safety can seem like just another task on a long list; or worse, an extra burden you've put upon them. The attitude might be, "You're going to make me as a supervisor do some things to make your job easier or to fill out your damned forms, and I've got my own work to do," said Rob Russell, a consultant for Strategic Safety Associates in Portland, OR. As a result, resentment builds.

To top it off, in their minds not only are you pushing your work off on them, but you're coming down on them when they don't do it exactly the way you want. Often that's the crux of the issue between safety personnel and line personnel – a perception of the safety person as a sort of "safety cop," said Len Jannaman, a regional vice president based out of Nashville, TN, for DuPont Safety Resources. "The last thing the supervisor wants is one more person telling him or her what a bad job they are doing," Jannaman explained.

To overcome all of this you need to change the supervisor's perception of you from "cop" to "coach." They need to see you as the person "who is going to keep them out of trouble," Jannaman said.

Feature at a Glance

Winning buy-in from front-line supervisors for safety initiatives is hard but essential work. It's easier to accomplish when the safety professional is viewed as a helpful resource.

Key points

- Although committed supervisors are vital for safety to succeed, not all supervisors have made that commitment.
- Too often safety personnel are viewed as safety cops, which can set up a contentious relationship with supervisors.
- Safety professionals can adjust the supervisor's perception of them in a variety of ways, thereby lessening resistance.
- Resistance can be a positive force.

Engagement, motivation works at Brady Corp.

In the real world, just sending memos or holding safety meetings doesn't work anymore. That's "the old way of doing things," said John Ciba, director of Facilities, Environmental and Safety Engineering for Brady Corp., Milwaukee, a manufacturer of high-tech labels. One reason is that in the manufacturing field, "many of us don't have a lot of people with the title of supervisor," he said. "That's key to pushing a program through an organization – you have to recognize that many supervisory personnel don't carry the title of supervisor." At Brady, 1,500 of its 3,200 employees have some sort of supervisory role.

Ciba also realized "just telling people [to be safe or follow the rules] doesn't work." While most employees want to do the right thing, when factors such as time constraints get in the way, they begin to react rather than think it through, he explained. "We all have reasons why we don't do certain requirements. You can't deny that human trait; you have to learn how to best manage it."

Instead, Ciba and staff ask everyone up and down both the management chain and the supervisory chain to become co-owners of the safety program and become more actively involved in the process. Supervisors are asked to engage in four key responsibilities:

1. Model safe work habits. If you are in a work area that requires safety glasses, make sure you are wearing your safety glasses.
2. Train and develop safe, productive employees. Make sure workers understand they need to work safety, not just quickly.
3. Ensure team safety and well-being. Cover the basics: Are procedures nailed down; has training been done?
4. Ensure team safety performance and compliance. Correct situations as they arise.

Ciba and company use an internal scoring system to measure performance. It revolves around what Ciba called "dashboard warning-like metrics," such as safety inspections, housekeeping inspections, injury reporting, workers' compensation and near misses. The resulting monthly report is a main communication tool between safety engineer and supervisor, he said. It lets them know what the safety professional is focused on so they can become more aware of it, too.

Safety personnel also conduct risk-based reviews of each work area. "That hones it in for supervisors so they know what kinds of training they need to offer," Ciba said.

In the end, working with supervisors is about communication. "Part of the trick is engagement and motivation," Ciba said. "People are really wondering, 'What do I need to do and how do I do it?' They understand things need to be done, but they don't understand exactly what they need to do. This [program] gives them an opportunity to talk through things."

You can shift their image of you in several ways, including:

Adjust your own attitude. "You can't do anything about other people's attitudes, but you can take a look at your own," Russell said. He pointed out that safety professionals sometimes adopt an air of superiority when dealing with supervisors that says, "I'm doing really important work and you aren't."

That attitude "really boils a supervisor who's busting his rump to get the job done," he explained. Keep in mind that this attitude can come across in very subtle ways, so work to tone it down and replace it with empathy. An example Russell gave was to say, "Here's the regulations, we've got to do them, what can I as a safety professional do to make it easier for you to understand and pass the rules on to workers?" Russell acknowledged you might not be able to do much, but just letting them know you are there to help will cut down on resistance, he said.

Realize not all supervisors are created equal. There is a "huge range of good and bad supervisors," Russell noted. This makes it unwise to treat them all the same. You have to "pay attention to who you're dealing with in terms of competencies," he said. "Some need more hand-holding; others you can trust more."

Shed the "outsider" label. Supervisors are less open to safety efforts if they believe the safety professional doesn't know the first thing about the actual work processes. If you didn't come up through the ranks or have a similar type of job in the past, the thanks you'll get for your efforts is likely to be, "I don't appreciate you telling me how to run this machine."

To combat that, gain some knowledge of the work being done, Jannaman said. He suggested asking permission to shadow a supervisor or the supervisor's workers, framing it as "I need to understand more about your job, I need to see what you deal with." Not only does it enhance your credibility, it demonstrates you care.

Understand the pressures and priorities that drive supervisors. Just as you want supervisors to understand safety-related issues, they want you to understand their issues. "Line supervisors are being driven by different goals and objectives. What motivates them is doing a good job, but that job is defined by their boss, not the safety

person,” Jannaman said. Think of them as a customer, he suggested. What are their needs? What do they need help with? Acknowledge these pressures in your dealings with supervisors, but don't allow them to become excuses for not practicing safety.

Realize you have expertise supervisors need. One area you can help them in is rules and regulations. Supervisors can't keep up on everything; let them turn to you with their questions, Jannaman said. You can act as a resource in this area.

Support them in their safety responsibilities. The safety professional can mentor supervisors, showing them how different safety responsibilities are carried out. If the topic is conducting a toolbox safety talk, for example, don't just tell the supervisor to get it done, Russell said. Explain how to do it. Give them topics to cover and suggestions on how to cover them, or supply a handout or an article on the topic.

If the supervisor is doing a safety walk-through, go with the supervisor and model for them the kinds of things for which they should be looking, Jannaman suggested. “Train them to spot unsafe conditions and behaviors, to be

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— ROB RUSSELL

more aware,” he said. For example, if someone wasn't wearing his or her safety glasses, you could point it out or ask the supervisor if he noticed so-and-so walking around without glasses. Don't beat them over the head with it, he added. Be nonthreatening and nonjudgmental – focus on the behavior, not the person.

Transforming the resisters

Your efforts, no matter how effective, may not win over every supervisor in your company. How do you handle people who continue to rebuff safety efforts? Russell suggested you first establish rapport and trust with these people. That way, when

Matching supervisors and training at Alaska Tanker

One reason supervisors may be unsure about what action to take is because they lack supervisory skills. When Paul Manzi, safety advisor for Alaska Tanker Co., Beaverton, OR, began working with the company's safety program four years ago, he discovered that many of the company's supervisors, while technically competent in their jobs, really had no formal training in being a supervisor. As such, they were often following the letter of safety rules, but missing the intent. “Their skills as supervisors were in need of coaching,” he said.

Manzi and the company's leadership team began working with a couple of vessels to find out what this supervisory skill set should be and what tools they would need to get the job done. After four or five months of give and take, they had a new health, safety and environmental training program for supervisors. The training included what the supervisor's role should be, which both parties had decided included five things. Supervisors needed to be able to: Set objectives, communicate with employees, plan a job safely, be a team

builder and train workers. In short, they “needed to have a skill set to commend, correct and coach workers,” Manzi said. He added that all supervisors went through the training at the same time, because “we recognized that to get everyone on the same page, they needed to hear it at the same time.”

Although the training was only five hours, Manzi said safety personnel and line managers continue to train and support supervisors on an ongoing basis. For example, Manzi personally spends roughly five days annually on each of the company's 408 crude tankers in order to support supervisors.

The linchpin in all this, Manzi said, is not to talk about safety as if it were separate from work. “If we do any of this training for safety's sake alone, it falls on deaf ears or is muted,” he said. “It needs to be done in the context of doing the job – keeping yourself and others safe as well as helping them do their job. They've got to see it's going to benefit them.”

you have to talk about safety, they will be more open to you. Safety professionals can establish that rapport in a number of ways, including “being there, listening, finding out what other concerns they have that aren’t even safety-related, being a sounding board or a problem-solving helper,” he said.

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When problem people have surfaced at Brady Corp. in Milwaukee, the safety department arranges for a tour of that plant’s safety program by the senior manager in charge of that operation, according to John Ciba, the company’s director of Facilities, Environmental and Safety Engineering. As part of the tour, local management presents the status of its safety program, including where it is at and what its targets are for the current and coming year. The event sends a message about safety to those resisters. “To me the key is: If it’s important to my boss, it’s important to me,” Ciba said.

You might not want to get rid of all resistance, as it can be a positive force, according to Paul Manzi, safety advisor for the Alaska Tanker Co., in Beaverton, OR. “You may not see the obstacles to what you are doing. Those voices of resistance help you see that,” he explained. Instead, keep the lines of communication open and keep supervisors involved so that resistance can be constructively managed.

In the end, all the stakeholders interviewed came back to one key element for winning supervisor buy-in: Senior management support. Manzi summed it up this way: “If management doesn’t make [safety] a priority, front line will not do it, or at least not consistently. If you are marching down the road to change supervisors before you have management support, you could run out of steam before you get to where you need to be. If you get management support, then you can go to the next level. Without it, you can do it, but you can’t sustain it.”

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Take action

At the National Safety Council’s 91st Annual Congress & Expo in Chicago, Rob Russell, a consultant for Strategic Safety Associates, Portland, OR, spoke about mobilizing supervisors to be safety leaders. In a handout from the session, Russell listed a number of ways safety professionals can engage supervisors:

- Hold regular coffee conferences with supervisors. Make sure you do more listening than talking.
- Conduct new supervisor orientations. This is a good time to explain safety initiatives.
- Use supervisors as sounding boards, both formally and informally.
- Hold problem-solving meetings.
- Provide hints, reminders and positive reinforcement through notes or calls; memos, newsletters or article copies; meeting blurbs; and regular training.
- Provide praise and recognition. Make sure it comes from both the safety department and top management.
- Create campaigns with specific supervisory roles.
- Drop by as a guest expert at safety meetings held by supervisors.

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