



The One-Person Safety Department

Communication, Organization Help Make the System Work

As the environmental, health and safety manager for Glenroy Inc. in Menomonee Falls, WI, Jim Hillstrom is the company's entire safety department.

No support staff. No part-time help. A mountain of paperwork, compliance issues and safety programs to run. Missing a detail could mean monetary fines, and more paperwork – or someone's life. Many companies can't afford more help. That means people like Hillstrom need to be creative to make the system work.

What has proven useful for Hillstrom has been good communication and good organization. That's why he is down on the floor each morning talking to the day and night shifts, raising his visibility with them. "Part of communication is spending time with them," he said.

Good communication also breeds participation from workers. "The more you have folks participate and be involved with on-the-job safety, the greater the chance of reducing accidents, injuries and illnesses and having a very safe workplace," he said.

Hillstrom also stays organized to manage all the safety programs and regulatory issues. He makes lists, calendars and checklists to stay on track for small, medium and large projects. For example, he created a rolling calendar listing the safety topics he needed to address each month, from facility-wide training to smaller departmental meetings. He also set up 3-, 6-, 9- and 12-month goals for specific projects.

Hillstrom couldn't accomplish his job if it weren't for management. "I have so much help from the departmental managers," he said. "I say 'here's what we need,' and they say 'here's how we're going to get there.'"

Starting From Scratch

Based on his experience, Robert Watson, a safety specialist for DLA Enterprise Support-Europe, said the one-person safety shop can be successful under the right conditions. Factors in your favor include a small workforce, reduced scope of services, and an energetic safety culture from senior management down through front-line workers.

If the company doesn't have a formal safety program, or if you are inheriting a dysfunctional system, Watson recommends to initially emphasize compliance. "Focus on the worst hazards first for abatement and establish abatement priorities for all the hazards you identify," he said. Don't ignore the low-hanging fruit, Watson advises. This will provide a lot of quick fixes, "which impress those obsessed with the number of items corrected instead of the impact or magnitude of the hazards," he said.

Track your activities. People are resistant to change and may see you as an outsider or enemy – tracking your improvements provides hard data with which to lobby them. At a minimum, inform top management monthly of your progress in abating hazards. This will "demonstrate your value-added in the culture-change process," Watson said. Also provide a quarterly progress update to everyone in the organization, highlighting those supervisors providing the best support for your efforts.



Learn to talk the language of the employees. "Call it a 'thingamajig' if that's the word used by everyone," Watson said. And don't preach safety – focus on "meaningful campaigns to promote awareness. Changing behavior takes time."

Pick your battles wisely. "An end-around method with those in management sympathetic to a safety culture is significantly more productive than running up the middle into a stone wall of someone who is using double speak," Watson said. "If there are clearly some people holding your program back, lobby using objective data with empowered top management to make personnel changes. A key change of a couple senior people sends ripples down through the entire organization and everyone gets a clear picture that safety is serious business."

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