

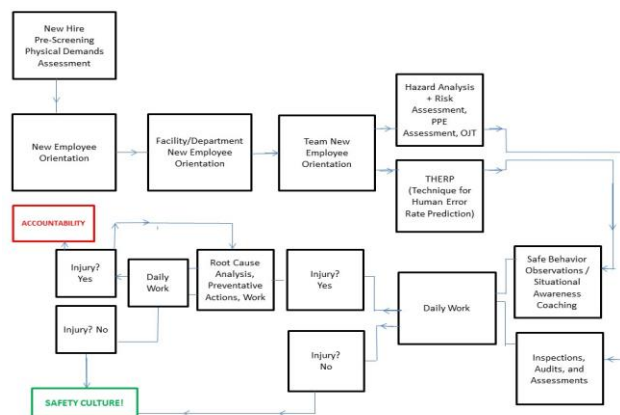


Perceptions: The Importance of Employee Engagement in Safety

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Safety begins and ends with perceptions. From the first conversation between the prospective team member and the employer, the team member begins to develop a perception of the employer's value – or lack thereof – of safety. If the new team member senses that the employer is not going to give consideration, let alone resources to safety, his or her perception will invariably begin to skew negatively. That perceived value is the employer's to lose. Similarly, if the team member has a concern that goes unaddressed, the perceived value of safety will lessen. When the employer does not place value on safety, the team member will learn not to as well. If a reported near-miss or incident goes without investigation or response, he or she will again lessen his or her perceived value of safety. The value of safety is a finite entity and will inevitably go away completely unless it's maintained through continuous, consistent input. It requires ongoing feedback requests, communications, leading indicator activities such as observations and inspections and continual improvement activities such as root cause analyses and more. What begins with the team member's first conversation continues up until his or her last day of employment, one that will come sooner than later if engagement is not a part of the workplace (Smith & Macko, 2014).

Figure 1 – Safety Interactions with the Team Member's Cycle of Employment



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Perceptions and their Effects on Work Practices

Perceptions of hazards, risks and culture play huge roles in whether we work safely. The way we perceive the risks associated with our work makes a big difference. Some may see a slip, trip or fall as a potentially life-threatening injury while others may shrug it off. These perceptions play a large role in our decisions to use hazard controls; if we don't perceive a risk, we may not take the time to find and use proper equipment, processes, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) or another form of hazard control. Many times, this direct perception of hazards and potential risk levels is a product of the perceived value of safety within our organization. If we don't believe safety to be a value and we perceive it to be less important to our leaders than other priorities, we're less likely to identify, assess and control hazards when they appear in the workplace and therefore less likely to work safely.

Safety's Encouragement or Discouragement

Our organization's culture may determine how we perceive our ability to speak freely about safety. If we believe that our leaders will respond negatively for bringing up a safety concern, that we'll be labeled as 'malingering', we likely won't bring it up. These perceptions dictate our ability to openly discuss safety and, by default, our ability to improve safety. As leaders, it is imperative that we develop positive perceptions of safety, perceptions that allow for open communication, consistent identifications of hazards, an awareness of risks and the importance of hazard control use. This, in turn, allows for an increased perception of the value of safety.

There are many aspects to developing a safety culture, but one simple action can get it started: we can ask employees about safety concerns. We can ask for recommendations. We can ask for feedback. We can ask for close call/near-miss events. We can ask for and accept this information as beneficial, value-added input towards safety improvement. We can actively encourage it. We can incentivize it. We can reward employees for discussing safety. In reality, focusing on accident rates can lead to reductions because employees may be simply scared to report an accident.

However, focusing on engagement and accident prevention encourages safety thinking and safe behaviors. It encourages the development of hazard controls, training and communication. When all team members acknowledge and recognize hazards, safe work practices and saying so if or when they don't, can make a huge impact on the safety of a workplace, and accident rates can decrease by default. It's up to us as leaders to engage employees on safety perceptions and to open the door for communication; the whole team will benefit for it.

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About the Author



Cory Worden, PhD ABD, MS, CSHM, CSP, CHSP, ARM, . REM, CESCO has over 15 years of experience in multiple fields and has published seven books as well as articles, presentations and courses for the NSC, ASSP, AOHP, ISHN, EHS Today, Gulf Coast Safety Institute and more. He has received five global recognitions and holds elected senior leadership positions with NSC, ASSP and AOHP advocacy teams. As of date publication, he is the NSC Government & Public Sector Division Vice Chair.

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