Creating a Culture of Safety

In most organizations, we create a workplace safety culture by (1) having company leaders, managers, and employees commit to being safe, (2) practicing "active caring" techniques, (3) engaging employees at all levels, and (4) making safety part of the performance appraisal process. An organization should expect its leaders, managers, and people to make safety a value. There are also "grassroots" safety efforts -- where there are employee-led safety efforts; however, we'll focus here on the more common ways of creating a safety culture.

Best Practices and Creating a Safety Culture
A safe and healthful workplace depends on effective management to ensure that hazards are identified and that effective physical and administrative protections are established and maintained.

The active engagement of business owners and managers is essential to the establishment and implementation of an effective safety and health program. Management must:

- Establish and communicate policies
- Guide their team and employees to set safety and health goals and objectives
- Provide needed resources including money, machines, materials, methods, staffing and time; and they must motivate personnel through active participation in and support of safety and health activities
- Recognize that although traditional safety programs have been geared towards workers' compensation programs, non-occupational and other employee benefits programs should be incorporated into the process.

Creating a Safety Culture
Developing strong safety cultures has the single greatest impact on injury reduction of any process. For this reason, developing a safety culture should be a top priority for all businesses. [1]

What Is Safety Culture
Safety cultures consist of shared beliefs, practices, and attitudes that exist at an establishment. Culture is the atmosphere created by those beliefs, attitudes, and so forth, that shape our behavior. An organization's safety culture is the result of a number of factors, such as: [2]

- Management and employee norms, assumptions, and beliefs
- Management and employee attitudes
- Values, myths, and stories
- Policies and procedures

- Supervisor priorities, responsibilities, and accountability
- Production and bottom-line pressures versus quality issues
- Action or lack of action to correct unsafe behaviors
- Employee training and motivation
- Employee involvement or buy-in

In a strong safety culture, everyone feels responsible for safety and pursues it on a daily basis; employees go beyond the call of duty to identify unsafe conditions and behaviors and intervene to correct them. For instance, in a strong safety culture, any worker would feel comfortable reminding the plant manager or owner to wear safety glasses. This type of behavior would not be viewed as forward or overzealous but would be valued by the organization. Likewise co-workers routinely look out for one another and point out unsafe actions and conditions to each other.

Over time the norms and beliefs of the organization shift focus from eliminating hazards to eliminating unsafe actions and building systems that proactively improve safety and health conditions. Employee safety and doing something the right way takes precedence over short-term production pressures. Simultaneously, production does not suffer but is enhanced due to the level of excellence developed within the organization.

Safety Culture Process: Getting Started
These next items represent the major processes and milestones that are needed to implement the safety culture process successfully. Note that the list focuses an organization on the process rather than on individual tasks.

People tend to focus on the accomplishment of tasks, that is, to train everyone on a particular concern or topic (e.g., implement a new procedure for incident investigations). Companies that maintain their focus on the larger process to be followed are far more successful. They can see the forest apart from the trees and thus can make midcourse adjustments as needed. Because they never lose sight of their intended goals, they tend not to get distracted or allow obstacles to interfere with their mission. The process itself will take care of the task implementation and ensure that the appropriate resources are provided and priorities are set. [3, 4]

Ownership and management buy-in. This is the very first step that needs to be accomplished. Owners and managers must be on board. If they are not, safety and health will compete against core business issues such as production and profitability. As companies become more safety successful, organizational barriers, such as fear and lack of trust—issues that typically get in the way of all of the organization's goals—are diminished. Most people place a high personal value on their own safety, and if you are sincere in the approach used, employees will view your safety efforts as things that are truly being done for them.

- Continue building buy-in. Create an alliance or partnership among management, the union (if one exists), and employees. Spell out a compelling reason for the change to everyone. People have to understand why they are being asked to change what they normally do and what

success will look like.

- Identify key personnel to champion the change. If it's only you, make yourself visible, and articulate the reasons for the changes. The reasons need to be compelling and motivational. People frequently respond when they realize how many of their co-workers or subordinates are being injured (or have the potential for injury).
- Build trust. Trust is a critical part of accepting change. Trust will occur as different levels within the organization.

- Conduct self-assessments/benchmarking. In order to get where you want to go, it is essential to know where you are starting from. Use self-audit mechanisms, visits to other successful companies, and safety perception surveys to measure the strengths and weaknesses of the safety culture.

- Provide initial training of management and supervisory staff, union leadership (if present), safety and health committee members, and key employees. This training may include safety and health training, and any needed management, team building, hazard recognition, or communication training. By training these people, you have a core group to draw on as resources. Training also gets key personnel on board with needed changes. In a small company, it is you responsible for effectively training you people.

- Establish a steering committee (in larger companies). A steering committee made up of management, employees, union (if present), and safety staff should be established. This group's purpose is to facilitate, support, and direct the safety culture change processes. To be effective, the group must have the authority to get things done.

- Develop company safety vision. The company safety vision should consist of key policies, goals, measures, and strategic and operational plans. These policies provide guidance and serve as a check that can be used to see if the decision being made supports or detracts from the organization's intended safety and health improvement process.

- Align the organization. The organization should be aligned by establishing a shared vision of safety and health goals and objectives. Ownership and management must support the workplace safety program by providing resources (time, training, and equipment) and holding managers and supervisors accountable for doing the same. The entire management and supervisory staff needs to set the example.

- Define specific roles. Define roles and responsibilities for safety and health at all levels of the organization. Safety and health must be viewed as everyone's responsibility—working safe is not a choice. Clearly spell out how the organization deals with competing pressures and priorities (i.e., production versus safety and health).

- Develop a system of accountability. A system of accountability should be developed for all levels of the organization. Everyone must play by the same rules and be held accountable for

their areas of responsibility. The sign of a strong culture is when the individuals hold themselves accountable.

- Develop measures. Develop measurable objectives and measure the number of:
  - o Hazards reported or corrected
  - o Safety walk-arounds
  - o Equipment checks
  - o Safety meetings conducted
  - o Employees leading a safety meeting
  - o Completed job safety analyses Safety as a Company Value

In addition to core regulatory requirements, and the strong link between active workplace safety programs and low rates of occupational injury and illness, we advocate that you make employee safety and health an intrinsic company value (that working safe is not just a "program," but a way of doing things). Ideally, safety and health programs should correspond with and become part of the organization's overall mission or business plan. Every employee should know what the goals of the organization's safety program are and how they are to be achieved.

Safety must be integrated as an intrinsic company value (not a priority) among every leader, manager, and employee in the organization. Safety should be viewed as a value just like honesty, working hard, and showing up to work on time. Values are embedded; while priorities can change. Making safety a company value leads to building a workplace safety culture.

References
1. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), Small Business Handbook, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2005).
2. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), Safety and Health Management Systems eTool, Module 4, Fact Sheets: Creating a Safety Culture, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2005).
3. Leadership - the Driver for Safety and Health, Safety and Health Programs Assistance Training: Achieving Excellence. University of Alabama, March 10, 1996.
4. See Note 2.
* Dan Hopwood, MPH, ARM & Steve Thompson, ARM, COSS, Workplace Safety: A Guide for Small and Midsized Companies, (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., NJ, 2006).

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