Empower Your Change Drivers

Strategies for Engaging Employees in Safety Culture Improvement

Empowering front-line workers—those who stand to benefit the most from an effective safety process—has been talked about much over the last decade, yet many organizations that start the journey seem to stop abruptly. Regardless of the reason for derailment, a failed attempt can have a lasting negative impact on safety culture. From the front-line employee’s perspective, it could appear that another flavor-of-the-month safety program has been whisked away and replaced with more important initiatives (e.g., production, quality).

Understanding how to successfully engage and empower your workforce is the key to ensuring that your organization can start and continue the journey toward safety culture excellence.

Safety culture is how things are done. It is your walk, your talk, your actions and your beliefs. It is what you do without even thinking about it. Culture includes the norms, attitudes, beliefs and ideas of your workforce. Understanding these beliefs and perceptions of the workforce is the first step in identifying the areas in which you should focus the improvement efforts.

For example, imagine an incident at your workplace in which an employee performed an at-risk behavior that resulted in an injury. As a matter of fact, about 90% of all injuries are related to at-risk behaviors. Why is this? Why do people take safety risks? Is it because they want to get injured? Absolutely not. It is because something has created or influenced an attitude, belief or idea where the employee(s) think the act will not result in injury or place emphasis on something else that is perceived as more important. These influencers can be defined as the “norms” of the culture. They may include, pressures to produce more, to be more efficient, to save time, company values and management systems, past experiences that did not result in injury and a lack of risk awareness.

Addressing these influencing factors is a large part of the safety culture improvement process, and success requires involving all of the right people in building the process.

However, those most commonly charged with developing and writing standard work procedures and safety policies/procedures are engineers and safety professionals, many of whom have never performed the specific tasks for which they are writing procedures. Further, their experience with the requirements of such documents is limited to regulatory text or to information obtained from incident investigations. The point is that we seldom engage the people performing the actual work in the creation and documentation of the work requirements. Failure to do so can create gaps in those procedures; when those gaps align with influencers, as mentioned, the risk of injury is more likely.

Engineers and safety professionals have important roles to play in the workplace, but it is critical that employees who perform the day-to-day front-line activities be involved in developing procedural documents within the boundaries set by the management team and regulations.

Additionally, involving the front-line workforce gives these employees a sense of
ownership that will result in greater compliance and honest assessment about whether the system truly works.

The most successful organizations employ this employee engagement technique not only in continuously improving current safety policies and procedures, but also in error-proofing existing safety processes. Employees volunteer to participate on teams that create improved safety accountabilities around these processes, focusing on things that leaders can control. Such accountabilities must be connected through all employee levels of the organization and must be flexible enough to be applied effectively in each work group or team. These accountabilities then become their own leading metrics.

Engaging the front-line workforce helps show that management trusts the judgment of the front line and in turn creates a more positive perception toward safety. Examples of engaging the workforce can include determining what a high-quality pre-shift safety meeting looks like, identifying the appropriate items to be placed on an inspection checklist, deciding what a pre-task risk assessment should include, determining the training requirements for each employee and identifying opportunities to recognize good performers.

This is not a new approach to managing and improving safety. In fact, it is the same improvement process that has proven successful in other important areas of business. The words “continuous” or “continual” have been used for many years to describe a system for making incremental improvements in business processes over the long term. Why not use the same system to manage safety? The process is not easy, but it is fairly simple. Start by assessing the current state of the safety culture, then build a strategy, develop needed improvements through conducting rapid improvement workshops, pilot those improvements in small sample sizes, make any necessary adjustments and complete a full rollout to the workforce, then check performance. This cycle continues to be repeated over the long term. Additionally, as new safety programs, policies, etc. are created, the front line should be engaged sooner, rather than later, to ensure the best safety culture possible.

Traditionally, safety management has been left up to the safety professional and change has been driven by the measurement of things that we did not intend to happen (injuries, illnesses and fatalities). Results-based indicators provide some degree of benefit to management teams, as such measurements tracked over the long term can provide evidence that a safety system is going in the right, or wrong, direction.

However, most employees cannot explain how injury rates are calculated, and this management approach provides little in the way of employee engagement and ownership. Managing safety through the things that people can control and influence (activities) and engaging the right people in designing what those activities look like provides an organization with a better opportunity to measure performance and to recognize success (accountability), which leads to the development of a culture of safety excellence.

Changing a culture is difficult and takes persistence and consistency; the same diligence is required in other business system improvement efforts. Using proven business management principles, engaging and empowering the workforce, allowing for flexibility where needed and holding everyone accountable are the only methods sure to deliver consistent results.

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