Engaging the Supplemental Workforce
To Achieve Positive Safety Performance
By Thomas L. Bayer

For nearly 20 years, the author has been involved with monitoring the safety performance of supplemental workers, assisting these workers at customer locations or directly managing supplemental workers. In all cases, whether providing oversight as the customer or the contractor, the greatest hurdle to developing positive safety performance has been engagement.

The struggle, in the author’s experience, has typically been the management team—customer and/or contractor—asking how to involve workers in the process. How do we get the workers to own their safety? How do we change or improve the existing safety culture? How do we engage people?

While it is important to consider these questions as they pertain to the engagement of individual workers, it is equally important for owners and contractors to develop a firm foundation of engagement early in the process of assuming a new contract relationship.

Contract Award/Mobilization
Engaging the supplemental workforce begins before a single worker is hired in the field. Engagement begins at home. Organizational value statements that place safety at the top of the list set the tone and clearly identify executive leadership expectations.

Engagement then rolls into the bid process. Early in this process, the contractor will begin looking at available staff and supervisory personnel to assign should the contract be awarded. This critical step often fails to get much attention. The SH&E manager assigned to the project must know and understand the operations team that will be assigned to execute work at the customer location. Identifying the key players early in the process will promote a smoother transition upon contract award.

Individual personalities are not the key focus at this point. What is key is that open and honest communication exists between the support groups (e.g., SH&E, quality) and the operations team. They must work together to develop a detailed mobilization plan and decide on division of labor in order to create a well-organized effort. This is especially critical if the contract covers multiple sites or locations.

Upon successful award of a contract and prior to actually mobilizing the work location, the assigned SH&E manager must make initial contacts with the customer SH&E management team. While this initial contact is often a general introduction, some vital items must be identified:

1) Customer contacts, including name, contact numbers and title.
2) Communication of company safety philosophy to the customer must be a constant and consistent message.
3) Customer safety policies and procedures. Even if the contract spells out which policies (customer or contractor) will be enforced, conflicts often exist. A gap assessment must be completed to identify process/procedure conflicts and resolutions. This must be shared with the operations team as early in the process as possible.
4) Available facilities.
5) Resources to be supplied by the customer or subcontractor.
6) Identification of local treatment facilities. This is a good time to ask the customer about its experience with these facilities.
7) Industrial hygiene support services.

Boots on the Ground
Once the team puts boots on the ground on site, the real work begins. At this point, the SH&E manager and the operations team will typically get their first face-to-face opportunities with the new customer.

This is the next critical step to engaging the supplemental workforce: building relationships between the customer and contractor. Both teams must work together, develop a communication path, ensure that they understand contract terms and work in the same direction.

At this point, the SH&E manager should have all of the available information and resources to develop a solid safety orientation for use as the supplemental workers are either hired or rolled over from the previous contractor. At all costs, try to avoid a “new sheriff in town” approach to mobilizing the job.

Developing Core Staff
Whether it is a multiple-site or single-site contract, SH&E staffing is vital. Buy-in from the internal customer (the operations team) and from the external customer are needed to assemble a strong team. The individual(s) chosen to fill the site SH&E roles must be able to develop relationships with you, the management team, the customer and craft personnel. Even the most educated, certified and qualified individual may not be a good fit for a particular contract or a specific site depending on the circumstances. The SH&E manager must determine which of the following qualities are the most critical for success:

1) advanced education or degree;
2) professional certification;
3) communication skills, including the ability to listen;
4) strong field person;
5) analytic in nature;
6) people person.

Building Relationships
The field SH&E professional must be able to develop positive working relationships with his/her internal customers. This does not mean that the safety department and operations need to agree all of the time. Open, honest communication is vital. Consistency is critical. Trust is an absolute.

The SH&E professional must also develop positive working relationships with external customers to ensure success. They include:

1) customer SH&E personnel;
2) customer site management;
3) other contractors;
4) medical treatment personnel;
5) workers’ compensation personnel.

Engaging the Craft
Clearly, many aspects of engagement must be addressed before one craft person is hired. The process to this point may take weeks or even months to accomplish. It is at this juncture that the real challenges arise.

In many cases, the new contractor will simply roll the existing craft workforce over from one payroll to another. This is the first opportunity to engage the craft workforce. But this is also a difficult time, depending on the size of the workforce, to undergo transition. Problems in the payroll process will...
have a huge impact on worker morale and motivation.

How does one manage this change? First, understand that the workers will be facing a great deal of uncertainty. While this is a business opportunity for the contractor, this may be a life event for the individual worker. Be aware of how long workers have been at this location, either with the previous contractor or several previous contractors. There will be issues of trust initially, and trust affects safety performance. It is critical that the contractor earns the trust of the workforce.

Other obstacles may emerge. Attitudes among the workforce such as, “We’ll still be here after you’re gone,” and “It’s the way it’s always been,” are difficult to manage. Geographical differences can be challenging. What is the local culture? Are there local or regional accents or speech patterns? Several things can be done to ease the transition and earn workers’ trust:

1. Develop training and programs specific to site needs.
2. Utilize supplemental workers as safety observers.
3. Conduct specialty training to identify required behavior, such as company-specific job safety analysis training or behavior observation training. For example, the author worked with his team to develop a training program entitled, “The Way That It’s Always Been—Why It Can’t Be.”
4. Develop a safety champion, safety scout or similar program to get employees involved in the safety process.
5. Develop a recognition and reward program to identify those groups or individuals who choose safe behaviors rather than a safety incentive program based on reporting or recordkeeping criteria.
6. Establish minimum standards and enforce them consistently and constantly.

Working Together for Success

Some keys to engaging the supplemental workforce relate directly to how well the contractor and the customer developed partnering relationships. The terms partner and partnership are important. These terms imply unity and inclusion and help set the tone with craft workers. It is also important that

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b) sharing of lessons learned from across the industry.
3) The contractor and customer SH&E teams must work together and be seen interacting in the field.
4) While the contractor’s success (or failure) is typically judged by numbers (e.g., OSHA rates, DART rates), the most important thing to remember is that each statistic represents real people experiencing real injuries.

Conclusion

Engaging the supplemental workforce goes much deeper than just trying to get the craft workers involved in the safety process and takes much more than flavor of the month programs to generate interest. The contractor must develop good working relationships with both internal and external customers. To provide the best opportunity for success, consideration must be given early in the process to identify the proper people to staff SH&E positions. Customer and contractor SH&E personnel must work together for the common good, be seen by workers interacting in the field, and collaborate to identify gaps and implement long-term training and process improvements that provide for craft involvement in the safety process. The development of leading indicators that measure behaviors and process compliance will help identify gaps or weaknesses and prevents relying solely on lagging indicators.

Engagement begins before contract award and continue throughout the contract. Knee-jerk approaches to emergent issues typically fail to identify long-term, meaningful change, can create cost issues and take focus away from other critical initiatives. What is needed is well-thought-out, early management interventions to take action on those gaps identified using leading indicators.

Engagement begins at home.

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