Checklists can improve a workplace by encouraging and documenting actions. However, they can also make things worse by adding unnecessary steps or by not being followed through, which communicates that employees do not have to follow rules. The author has seen firsthand numerous checklists that employees deemed useless and admitted to pencil whipping or not completing.

When employees do not use checklists, it is often because they question the value, time spent and leader support for completing them (and often these criticisms are valid). Each time a checklist is implemented and not used, it communicates that only some of the company rules need to be followed; this creates confusion and uncertainty. Therefore, it is important for organizations to eliminate unnecessary checklists and get the most out of those they do use.

Steps to Improve Safety Checklists

Leaders can take a few steps to evaluate and improve their safety checklists so that they produce the intended outcome. An example has been carried through the steps to illustrate.

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1) Determine Requirements

Determine the legal and corporate requirements that must be met with the checklist. Organizations may require daily checklists when it is legally required only weekly, monthly or not at all. This is not to say that checklists should only meet the bare minimum requirement, but it does provide some parameters for working through the next steps.

If no legal or corporate requirements for a checklist exist, its use should be carefully considered. Too often checklists are added after an incident because doing so creates the illusion that something has been done to address the situation when in truth it does not improve safety at all. Checklists work best when people need reminders to complete actions and when the data can be used to make predictions and adjustments to improve safety.

Example: Utility workers were asked to complete a daily 26-item truck inspection checklist before leaving each day. Also, a truck logbook was completed daily to meet legal and corporate requirements; this was done separately from the checklist. Employees viewed the checklist as redundant even though it included several more items.

2) Gather Data

Gather data on the checklist’s utilization. This helps one understand the current situation and evaluate changes. Some questions to ask include:
- Is it completed as required?
- Is it pencil whipped?
• Do employees find it useful?
• Does using the checklist result in a safer work environment versus not using it?

If people are not using a checklist, it is likely because the checklist is too difficult or does not seem valuable. If the checklist does not make the workplace safer, it should be discarded or changed. Avoid using the data to reprimand employees and instead view the data collected as a baseline that can be used to determine whether changes made to the checklist improve its use and effectiveness.

Example: Looking at the truck inspection checklists that had been completed in the past 3 months, it became obvious that no one ever marked any items as “needs repair.” Some checklists had a straight line drawn through the boxes, which indicated pencil whipping. In an anonymous opinion survey, the workers admitted to not using the checklists as intended and not viewing them as useful or as making things safer.

3) Consider the Motivating Factors & Barriers

People are more likely to complete a task when they have the skills, time, materials, knowledge and motivation to do so. This is a main reason to simplify a checklist, make it readily available and only require its use as often as is truly necessary. Is it better to have people pencil whip a 26-item checklist every day or thoughtfully use a five-item checklist once per week?

Motivation is altered by what happens when we perform a behavior. If employees complete the checklist, do they know whether anyone looks at the information and uses it? Do data show that the workplace is safer when employees use the checklist compared to when they do not? Is there any acknowledgment for completing the checklist? If completing or not completing the checklists gets the same response from the boss (i.e., none), people will stop using the checklist over time. Employees must understand the value and know that people are paying attention.

Therefore management must gather feedback from the people completing the checklist. They are the only ones who truly understand the barriers and motivators for using it as intended. Often, employees do not understand how to complete checklist items or view some items as irrelevant to their job. An effective checklist feels simple and relevant to employees.

People tend to provide more honest feedback when they do not fear retribution. Therefore, ask for the feedback anonymously or have employees make a list of the checklist’s strengths and weaknesses together without their boss or safety personnel in the room. It is important to utilize the feedback because it will increase the chance that employees will provide honest input again. Even if the feedback is not ideal, it is the key to creating a functional checklist.

Some feedback questions to ask include:
• Do you have time to complete the checklist?
• Do you understand each of the checklist items?
• How long does it take to complete?
• Does your boss notice whether you complete the checklist?
• Does this checklist help you perform the task more safely? Why or why not?
• How could this task be made safer with or without a checklist?
• If you could make an ideal checklist for this task, what would it look like?

Example: During the feedback gathering phase, workers stated that the checklist would realistically take 20 to 30 minutes to complete and that their boss would complain if they were not in their truck driving to the first job within 5 minutes after punching in. They were certain that no one ever looked at the checklists after they were completed.

For some checklist items, such as “inspect each bolt,” workers were not sure whether they should look at each bolt or use a wrench to make sure each one was tight. Additionally, if the vehicle had a real issue, employees had to complete a different form for a mechanic. Since they used a different truck almost every day, they did not feel they needed to address minor issues because someone else would probably do it. Addressing those issues took time away from being productive, which got them in trouble with the boss. Mechanics inspected the trucks weekly, and usually caught and addressed issues without the utility workers doing anything.

After further discussion, it was suggested that a few items that appeared more relevant and useful could be added to the logbook they were completing daily rather than having two separate checklists to complete. In addition, being assigned the same truck for a set period would create more ownership around the vehicles and increase employees’ motivation to maintain them.

Pilot & Repeat

After creating an improved checklist, pilot it with a small group and ask for more feedback. Having employees modify the checklist can improve buy in and increase usage. A good checklist can be ruined by poor implementation. Supervisors must be brought on board to help support the implementation. Asking for employees’ feedback will help create a checklist and process that everyone finds useful and uses consistently.

Example: The company took the workers’ suggestion and added a few items to the logbook based on mechanic recommendations. These items were easy to check, such as looking for oil under the vehicle, but also useful for the mechanics. The mechanics put a stamp in the log each time they looked at it to show the workers that they were looking at and using the information. And, the workers’ supervisors tracked compliance and acknowledged that the workers were sticking to the new process. They piloted a program of assigning specific trucks to workers, and when it improved maintenance and truck cleanliness, they decided to roll it out company wide.

Conclusion

A good checklist can make working safer and easier. A bad checklist can waste time and damage morale, and that can make things less safe. By following the steps outlined in this article, OSH professionals can construct improved checklists for employees.

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