Safety Audits as Leading Indicators

By Anthony R. Schiavi

Safety audits can be leading indicators that are both measurable and observable in terms of identifying at-risk behaviors and/or unsafe conditions. The Boston Globe is a case example that highlights how safety audits can affect an organization.

In 2000, the company’s self-insured workers’ compensation costs were projected at more than $6 million with future years predicted to exceed $10 million. About 50% of the reported injuries were musculoskeletal in nature, consuming about 75% of the company’s workers’ compensation costs. Claim abuse was an issue. Management was not engaged or accountable. The safety culture was weak.

Using benchmarking tools, the company assessed 12 safety areas, ranking each from fundamental to world class: 1) visible management commitment; 2) working safety policy; 3) integrated organization for safety; 4) line organization responsibility and accountability; 5) aggressive safety goals; 6) high standards of performance; 7) supportive safety personnel; 8) progressive motivation; 9) comprehensive accident investigation; 10) effective two-way communications; 11) continuous safety training; and 12) safety auditing. The company decided to concentrate on four elements: safety audits, incident investigation, management accountability and communications.

Safety Audits

Safety audits are beneficial for several reasons. They send a clear message to employees that the company cares about their safety and that the company cares about employees’ safety concerns. They also reveal behavioral issues that affect safety.

At The Globe, supervisors and foremen conduct at least four safety audits per month with 50% required behavioral safety observations—totaling about 2,400 safety audits per year. The company has a simple, 1-page audit form that covers these topics/elements: PPE; employee position; ergonomics; tools; machinery and equipment; operating procedures; and housekeeping. The form identifies area audited, and documents observations and conversations with an employee, recommendations, management follow-up and safety department review. The system generates several standard reports by employee, department, date and type of observation.

Observational safety audits are used to reinforce positive safety behavior and change at-risk behavior. The Globe defines an observational safety audit as an action under the employee’s direct control (e.g., not using PPE, not lifting safely). Elements such as housekeeping and safety guards are not included.

During observational audits, rather than focus on negative aspects of behavior and conditions, Globe personnel reinforce safe behaviors and thank employees for their attention to safety using the SAFE technique:

S: Specify safe work practices observed.
A: Apply praise immediately, consistently and privately.
F: Finish with a thank you.
E: Encourage more of the same safe behavior.

Personnel also use the INSTRUCT technique:

I: Initiate feedback immediately, consistently and privately.
N: Note safe behaviors first.
S: Specify any at-risk behaviors.
T: Express concern about such behaviors.
R: Review the alternative safe work practice.
U: Uncover and negate any system barriers (listen).
C: Conclude positively and get the employee’s commitment.
T: Thank the employee.

Positive Results

Thanks to a reinvigorated safety process that includes safety audits, the newspaper achieved several measurable results from 2002 to 2010:

• reduced work-related incidents by more than 75% (3.8 injury rate);
• reduced lost-time incidents by more than 85% (1.3 injury rate);
• reduced musculoskeletal disorders by more than 85%.
• cut workers’ compensation direct costs to less than $1 million per year.

What contributed to this success?

1) Management and unions created a solid partnership.
2) All managers and supervisors were given accountability for safety. Twenty-five percent of raises and bonuses were tied to safety goals.
3) Partnerships with vendors. For example, DuPont provided benchmarking tools. Humantech helped The Globe develop an ergonomic program that includes analyzing all job tasks and developing recommendations to reduce exposures where practical.
4) Management developed metrics and initiated culture changes, and added some administrative controls.

Safety audits have limitations. For example, they are discoverable by OSHA and attorneys, so it is important to have a formal follow-up plan for audit recommendations. To be most effective, safety audits should be part of an overall safety process, and they must be tailored to a company’s specific safety exposures.

Resources


Anthony R. Schiavi, P.E., CSP, ARM, is director, safety and environmental affairs at The Boston Globe. He holds a B.E.E. from Manhattan College and an M.B.A. from St. Johns University. He is a professional member of ASSE’s Greater Boston Chapter.