

Real Safety Begins with Real Values

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How can you make your worksite a safer place? Many employers take an approach that's similar to the one used by OSHA: they set strict rules and then dole out stricter penalties when those rules are violated. That kind of approach can improve a company's safety record. Sadly, it all too often has the unintended effect of damaging morale. And, in my experience, it's often a sign that a company really doesn't see safety as a critically important aspect of doing business.

Other companies view safety as something more than just another set of rules. They recognize the value of maintaining a safer workplace. They know that increased safety usually translates into better morale, less turnover, higher productivity, and better profits. Beyond the business reasons, they also have a genuine concern for the well-being of their employees, and want to ensure that everyone goes home healthy every night.

Those companies understand the value of creating and maintaining a safety culture. A safety culture goes beyond regulations and equipment to provide a clear sense that safe practices are an important part of everything the company does.

Having a safety culture is more than simply developing programs, performing audits, conducting weekly 'toolbox' training meetings at jobsites, or offering safety incentive programs. A culture is defined as consistent beliefs, values, and behaviors among all members of a population. It's an attitude that flows through every level of the business, and a set of values shared by all employees.

Of course, it's possible to have a negative safety culture. The best example of that is when management pays lip service to safety issues but clearly doesn't embrace the concept. Comments such as 'safety is just common sense,' 'safety is the safety director's responsibility,' 'accidents just happen,' and 'safety is a necessary evil,' often define the safety culture of a company more accurately than a room full of safety programs and procedures. If employees believe that management really doesn't care about safety, it won't be a priority for them, either.

Maintaining a safety culture can provide bottom-line benefits. Because an organization that is focused on safety will have fewer injuries, it reduces expenses that are related to injuries and illnesses. It reduces the number of workmen's comp claims, and leads to lower insurance premiums. Companies with strong safety cultures typically see less absenteeism and other problems that are triggered by morale issues. Why? When

workers sense a strong safety culture, they believe that their employer actually cares about them and their well-being ' and people work harder when they genuinely feel that they are valued.

What are the most important factors in developing a safety culture? The answer might surprise you. Respect and trust are two of the most essential elements in human interaction. While you can't expect everyone on your worksite to join hands and sing 'Kum Ba Yah,' you cannot neglect the human touch. After all, the very goal of a safety program is to change the behaviors of each individual. By addressing their external behaviors, you can begin to change the way they think about the actions they take.

The other critical factor is a genuine commitment on the part of the company's leadership. Leaders of companies with strong safety cultures understand that the goal of zero injuries is possible. They demonstrate this belief in their daily actions and decision-making, and they are nothing short of passionate about it! These companies enact effective safety processes to help implement their programs and measure results. Their employees receive education about the programs and are involved in safety initiatives through which they understand their specific roles and are recognized for success. Because the culture becomes tangible to employees, they're going to pay attention to it and start implementing it. Through teamwork, companies find safer, more efficient ways to complete projects and make their workplaces safer.

Finally, once you have all the basic elements in place, it's critically important to be consistent. Even those who initially doubt the validity of a safety culture will become supporters when they see policies and practices applied consistently.

Companies that manage to establish and maintain strong safety cultures will gain strength, provide safer work environments for employees, and build strong alliances between owners, architects, contractors, and subcontractors.

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