
Top-tier safety: whose job is it?

You've probably seen the signs on jobsites: "Safety is everyone's responsibility." That's absolutely true, and it's a guiding principle behind developing, implementing, and maintaining a basic safety program. But saying that everyone is responsible for safety isn't enough to get your safety program to the next level. Achieving world-class, top-tier safety in your organization demands that you go beyond simply sharing responsibility. In fact, it demands that you take responsibility for safety all the way to the top. If an organization is to attain the next level for top-tier safety performance, top management must set the goals, ensure that everyone is properly aligned to those goals, and give everyone reason to buy into the effort.

After all, employees essentially do what they are told to do, and their performance and enthusiasm is a direct result of what they see and hear from those above them in the organization chart. The same holds true for supervisory personnel and middle managers. They look up both for specific marching orders and for the spirit in which they execute those orders. Without clear and strong support from above, a company is doomed to have a poor safety culture. How do you know when an organization has attained top-tier safety? When you examine each level of the organization chart, you'll see clear evidence.

Upper Management

From the boardroom, to the CEO's office, to officers and site managers, everyone in top management makes it clear that safety is an important value for the company. They create the vision for the company's approach to safety, and weave it into elements such as the mission statement and any company safety mottos. Their vision isn't made up of empty, feel-good words – it's a serious commitment that they expect every employee to embrace, and they back that commitment by becoming personally and visibly involved with the safety process.

Middle Management

Given that direction from the people who run the company, it's up to the directors, district managers, and project managers to oversee the execution of the company's safety vision. They're the ones who have to find ways to turn the vision into a reality. They set specific objectives and develop plans for meeting them. Just as important, they monitor performance and keep everyone informed about progress. They know that what's measured is what gets done, and they hold every employee – and themselves – accountable for the safety of those they oversee.

Front-line Supervisors

The team leaders, foremen, and supervisors execute the safety program by directing the

day-to-day activities of employees. They explain the plans and provide resources to the employees needed to integrate those plans into their daily tasks. It's also their responsibility to conduct observations to make sure that the plan is being followed and to investigate situations where performance goals aren't being achieved. Truly effective supervisors will also find ways to recognize and reward employees whose behavior and performance are consistent with the company's goals.

Health & Safety Staff

While health and safety personnel may not always be involved in direct supervision of others, they're expected to provide support to all levels of management and coach people at all levels so that everyone can be as effective as possible. As the safety program is being developed, these experts will provide insight into regulatory information and advise management as to how to ensure that strategies and tactics are on target. They'll coordinate the plan's implementation and help management remain focused on goals. Once the plan is in place, they'll monitor data to identify potentially negative trends and problem areas, and offer interventions as early as possible.

Line Employees

This is where the proverbial rubber meets the road. All of the other steps, starting with top management's vision, will either succeed or fail in the hands of the line employees. If they believe that the company has a genuine interest in their safety, and they are convinced that their own actions can impact the safety of the jobsite, they are far more likely to embrace the safety program and improve the chances that the company will attain its goals. For example, if an individual for upper management shows up for a safety meeting and/or interacts with employees in the field to discuss safety, his or her presence sends a clear message to everyone who's there that safety is serious business.

A Strong Foundation

You can have all the right elements for a safety program, but it won't mean anything to the people who are expected to carry it out unless they see a visible commitment. If that all-important buy-in from the top is missing, the entire program falls apart, much like a building with an inadequate foundation will eventually collapse. But if it's clear that everyone truly believes in safety and backs it up with solid actions, you're well on the way to having a top-tier program.

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