

# Improving Management Support for Safety to Optimize Safety Culture, Part 1

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## Introduction

Organizational safety cultures have improved immensely over the years. The Journal of the American Medical Association (1999) estimates that occupational fatalities decreased by more than 90% from 1933-1997. This is largely due to increased cooperation between management and labor to improve safety, the development of federal agencies to improve safety (e.g., OSHA), and an overall emphasis on improving workplace conditions (e.g., supplying safety harnesses) and safety culture.



Unfortunately, some companies have hit a plateau in terms of safety performance in recent years. Optimizing management support for safety is a key ingredient for safety culture improvement and the further reduction of injuries. Part 1 of this article provides some general managerial recommendations with an emphasis on improving safety management systems (e.g., training, incentives) to optimize safety culture. Part 2 of this article (to appear next) examines specific management behaviors (e.g., empower employees, praise safe work practices) to improve safety culture.

## Management Support for Safety

Managers play a crucial role in developing and maintaining an ideal safety culture (Geller, 2008, 2005, 2002). This starts with providing a safe work environment and extends to hiring a sufficient number of high quality employees to do the job. Effective managers also ensure that:

- Safety rules are consistently and fairly enforced.
- Appropriate personal protective equipment (e.g., safety glasses, harnesses) is readily available to employees.
- Work schedules don't compromise employees' safety (e.g., excessive overtime, unrealistic production pressure).
- Management spends sufficient time on the floor interacting with employees.
  - This increases employee input for safety.

- This shows employees that “management cares.”
- Employees are actively involved in managing safety efforts.
- Safety management systems (e.g., training, discipline) are in place and effective.

### Safety Management Systems

Employees are more likely to be injured if the organization has safety management system failures such as: faulty equipment, insufficient safety training, unclear safety policies, non-existent safety meetings, excessive overtime, inadequate manpower, overemphasis on production (at the expense of safety), poor safety communication, and/or blame-oriented (or inconsistent) discipline procedures.

Managers improve safety culture by working to optimize these safety management systems:

<b>Near miss reporting:</b> There is a formal process in place to report near misses (i.e., an unplanned event that did not result in injury but had the potential to do so). Managers/Supervisors reinforce near-miss reporting with employees.
<b>Minor injury reporting:</b> Employees are encouraged to report minor injuries without fear of reprimand (or excessive paperwork).
<b>Incident Investigations:</b> Investigation teams, made up partially of hourly employees, thoroughly investigate all incidents and focus on system factors contributing to injuries. Hourly employees feel comfortable discussing their injuries with the team.
<b>Rules:</b> Safety rules are clear and practical. Hourly employees are sometimes consulted in developing rules and procedures.
<b>Training:</b> Safety training is interesting and effective. New employees receive sufficient training and more tenured employees receive refresher training.
<b>Hazard Recognition:</b> Employees understand the potential hazards of their jobs.
<b>Communication:</b> Employees are kept up to date on recent injuries and near misses. Management effectively conveys information about safety improvement efforts to employees. Management solicits employee input for safety and responds appropriately.
<b>Feedback:</b> Managers and supervisors regularly provide both corrective feedback and praise for safety. Safety feedback among peers is the norm instead of the exception.
<b>Audits:</b> Safety audits and inspections are regularly conducted. Audits are effectively used to identify and correct safety hazards.
<b>Employee Involvement:</b> Management promotes employee involvement and ownership for safety. Safety teams have hourly employee representation. Employees are encouraged and expected to take personal responsibility for safety.

Here are some specific safety management system considerations to improve safety culture.

### Fix Safety Problems in a Timely Manner

When employees' safety concerns aren't addressed in a timely matter (or at all), employees immediately believe *they don't care*. Beyond fixing safety problems, managers need to acknowledge that some concerns can't be addressed overnight (e.g., modernizing all equipment/processes). In these cases, it is important that managers communicate to employees what they're doing to remedy the situation and let them know when solutions should be expected. The worst possible response for managers is a non-response. In one instance, an organization

failed to remove dangerous (unnecessary) chemicals within their facility. Their efforts to demonstrate support for safety were undermined by this failure.

### **Testimonials Trump Statistics**

Because managers are held accountable for injury statistics, they sometimes overemphasize injury numbers at the expense of demonstrating genuine concern for employees' safety. As a result, employees are often inundated with safety graphs during safety meetings in an attempt (presumably) to motivate better safety performance.

In one very powerful safety presentation, a manager showed a slide of a young man with his wife and two kids. The manager gave details about the man including job position, education, hobbies etc. He then told the audience that the young man was killed the previous week in an explosion. No graphs or statistics were needed to discuss the importance of safety. Managers are well served to remember that safety statistics/graphs should be used to *supplement* testimonials and discussions from the heart.

### **Improve Safety Training**

Effective safety training engages employees in safety efforts and improves the overall safety culture (Williams, 2003). Unfortunately, employees often complain that safety training is boring and repetitive. Effective managers improve safety training by providing hands-on training (e.g., use actual fire extinguishers during fire safety training), bringing in guest speakers, hiring training consultants for special programs, and encouraging hourly employees to provide training. Hourly employees can provide great credibility when they conduct safety training.

Here are ten guidelines to follow when providing safety training:

1. Know the Content and Get Organized
  - Nothing instills fear in employees more than not fully understanding the materials. Employees are well served to over-prepare and practice delivering the materials before doing the actual training.
2. Provide Personal Stories and Testimonials
  - Stories and testimonials make the training personal and help participants better relate to the materials (and presenter). Testimonials with injuries (or near misses) drive home the purpose of the safety training.
3. Be Honest and Sincere
  - Employees speaking from the heart gain credibility and appreciation from participants. Trainers should regularly relate their own experiences and beliefs and avoid reading bulleted items slide after slide.
4. Don't Dwell on Mistakes
  - Trainers are well served to move forward following minor mistakes (e.g., stumbling over words, repeating a bulleted item), especially since training participants often don't notice the mistakes anyway.
5. Relax and Slow Down
  - When trainers are nervous, they often speak extremely fast. This decreases training effectiveness and disrupts the training schedule. Asking open ended questions to audience members often affords the trainer a chance to relax and slow down.

6. Ask Questions to Facilitate Discussion
  - Asking open ended questions is a great way to make the training more interactive and conversational. Plus, employees appreciate the opportunity to give their own opinions and trainers appreciate having others do some of the speaking.
7. Build In Group Exercises
  - Trainers should have group exercises built in to their training presentations. There is nothing worse for participants than a monotone, lengthy lecture. Group exercises facilitate group discussions. This helps employees better learn the materials and also makes the workshop more fun.
8. Manage Time Appropriately
  - Trainers need to start and stop on time as well as provide sufficient time for breaks (at least one break every 90 minutes).
9. Get Feedback
  - Feedback evaluation forms are very helpful in letting training understand how participants are reacting to the training. Feedback forms should encourage participants to specifically list strengths, weaknesses, and potential improvement ideas for the training.
10. Manage Logistics
  - Trainers need to ensure that the following items are in order: Computer, LCD Projector, Handouts, Flip charts (with markers, pens and tape), and (most importantly) food and refreshments.

### **Beware of Incentives**

Managers sometimes misuse (outcome based) incentives to demonstrate their support for safety. With typical incentives, employees who go a certain amount of time without a recordable injury get a monetary reward (Geller, 2001, 1996). An unintended consequence of this approach is that employees hide injuries (and pressure others to do the same) to get the reward. Two examples may demonstrate the problem with traditional incentives.

In one case, a woman slipped on the ice outside of her building in front of a dozen or so coworkers and was injured. In addition to her embarrassment and injury, some of her coworkers were angry with her for "screwing up" their incentive (they lost their \$75 gift card that month).

In another case, management brought in a huge big-screen television and placed it in the middle of their plant. Then, they placed a raffle wheel next to the T.V. that had the names of every employee typed on index cards. Management proceeded to tell employees that they would remove the names of employees reporting an OSHA recordable for the next 12 months. At the end of the year, they would pull out one index card and give the television to that lucky employee. Employees loved the idea.



So what happened? For one thing, employees quit reporting *any* injuries they could hide (i.e., “bloody pocket” syndrome). Second, employees that had serious injuries (that couldn’t be hidden) were angry because they were no longer eligible to win the television. In one case, a man was seriously injured when a coworker accidentally burned him while welding. Management decided to pull the victim’s name from the raffle drum in order to maintain consistency with their original agreement.

After 12 months, management had a big safety celebration and brought in the entire facility (plus corporate executives) to pull the winning index card. Ironically, the man who burned his coworker ended up winning the television. His coworkers were angry and management was embarrassed. This is a classic example of good intentions gone awry for safety. *If* incentives are used for safety, they should be process oriented and achievable. Also, sincere and legitimate praise should be the default “incentive” that managers use with employees to improve safety culture.

### Incident Analyses and Punishment

One of the fastest ways to damage safety culture is for employees to be punished excessively or inconsistently (Geller & Williams, 2001). It is imperative that managers:

- Establish a clear discipline process
- Use punishment sparingly and consistently
- Investigate “system factors” contributing to injuries
- Correct identified system problems

For many companies, incident analyses (or “injury investigations”) yield a root cause of *operator error* with the predictable corrective action of *re-training*. Unfortunately, this “investigation” may ignore numerous system factors (e.g., lack of manpower, insufficient training) that also influence the injury. Punishment is normally unwarranted if numerous system factors contributed to the injury, especially if the employee was unaware of the risk. However, punishment is almost always warranted in rare cases when employees violate cardinal sins (e.g., confined space infractions, not using a safety harness at 50 feet). Also, punishment may be appropriate when employees continue to defy safety rules, especially when other employees are operating safely.

Top-down managers who use excessive punishment (or outcome based incentives) often drive injuries underground because employees are afraid to report them. Creating a culture of fear minimizes open conversations between employees about safety and negatively impacts safety culture.

Overall, improving safety management systems is a key way to demonstrate management support for safety and enhance organizational safety culture. Part 2 of this article will address ways to improve management behaviors to further optimize safety culture.

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## Improving Management Support for Safety to Optimize Safety Culture, Part 2

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Many organizations have hit a plateau in terms of safety performance in recent years. Increasing management support for safety is an important way to improve safety culture and further reduce injuries. Part 1 of this article provided recommendations for improving safety management systems to optimize safety culture. Part 2 of this article will address specific ways to improve management *behaviors* to further optimize safety culture.

### Management Behaviors to Support Safety

In addition to improving safety management systems, managers need to know how their behavior impacts the probability that employees will follow safe work practices (Geller & Williams, 2001; Williams, 2002).

Here are 4 basic ways managers may inadvertently encourage at-risk behavior:

- A. Fail to reinforce a safe behavior
- B. Fail to coach an at-risk behavior
- C. Reinforce production more than (or instead of) safety
- D. Model at-risk behaviors

A. Leaders may fail to reinforce safe behaviors because they believe safe behavior is expected ("That's what they get paid for."), they don't notice safe behaviors, or they're simply too busy. Unfortunately, some employees may take shortcuts if they never receive praise for operating safely (especially since shortcuts are usually faster, easier, and more comfortable).

B. Leaders may fail to coach risky behavior because it's uncomfortable confronting others, production goals override safety, they don't think it's a "big deal," or they simply don't know the job as well as the employees performing it. Managers and supervisors are further reinforced for "looking the other way" because employees may go long periods of time without injury. Unfortunately, failure to coach risky behavior implies acceptance and greatly increases the likelihood that employees will take shortcuts.

C. Leaders may reinforce production more than safety simply because they believe that's what they get paid (and promoted) for. Managers and supervisors usually emphasize (and praise) productivity much more than safety. This minimizes the importance of safety and increases the likelihood of safety shortcuts and injuries.



D. Leaders may model risky behaviors because they don't know better, they've developed risky habits, or they don't think others will notice. When managers/supervisors perform risky behaviors, it sends the message that safety isn't that important. In one organization, the safety department (and management/supervisors) fought for months to get employees to accept stricter requirements with personal protective equipment (PPE) such as safety glasses, shoes, hearing protecting etc.

Unfortunately, their efforts were undermined by a television interview in which the company CEO answered reporters' questions (about company profits) on the shop floor, during operations, without any PPE. Many employees saw the interview on the news and decided that they too didn't need their PPE.

Simply put, safety culture is undermined when managers fail to: model safe behaviors, coach risky behaviors, reinforce safe behaviors, and balance safety and production demands.

### **Demonstrating Management Support for Safety**

Nearly all managers say that they support safety and don't want to see employees get hurt. However, these values don't always filter down to employees. Here are some guidelines for managers to follow to demonstrate their support for safety:

- Emphasize safety as much as production and quality, both formally (e.g., meetings) and informally.
- Always consider safety when making organizational decisions.
- Communicate the importance of safety as frequently as possible.
- Recognize that a failure to "walk the talk" for safety leads to employee resentment and apathy for safety.
- Advertise safety improvements and successes.
- Hold supervisors accountable for balancing safety and production demands.
- Increase personal visibility on the floor to discuss safety (and other) issues with employees.
- Institutionalize employee input (e.g., safety suggestion programs) for safety.
- Ensure that identified safety hazards are corrected quickly.
- Focus on proactive safety efforts, not just the safety numbers.

Legitimate management support for safety is vital to safety culture. Managers need to continuously discuss safety in meetings and informally with employees. Our experience has been that managers underestimate how much employees appreciate it when they walk around and talk with employees on the shop floor (or job site). This provides a great opportunity for managers to interact with employees, listen to their issues, show that they care about employees, and generally improve safety culture.

### **Empower Employees**

Employees overwhelmingly appreciate a collaborate relationship with management. Effective managers do a good job of getting employee input for safety and responding to it in an appropriate way (Geller, 2008, 2005, 2002; Williams, 2003). In one example, managers and supervisors of one U.S. steel mill were concerned about compliance problems with lock-out/tag-out (LOTO) procedures.



Rather than immediately going into “do it or else” mode, managers went around and spoke with hourly employees running the equipment. They found that the lock-out/tag out procedures were overly complicated and that the standard operating procedures (SOPs) for lock-out/tag-out were written for engineers, not hourly employees. To solve this problem, they successfully brought in engineers, safety professionals, hourly employees etc. to collectively streamline the LOTO process and revise the SOPs with user-friendly language. Overnight, the LOTO issue became a non-issue.

Employees who believe that management doesn’t listen to them or care about them are likely to become apathetic to the organization’s safety rules and initiatives. In fact, they may find creative ways to buck the system. In one instance, employees were ordered to wear their safety glasses at all times in the building, even in areas where it didn’t make sense to have them on. On top of that, the site had a reputation for seldom fixing and addressing serious safety issues (e.g., asbestos in the building). Most employees begrudgingly wore the safety glasses. However, a few employees got creative and popped the lenses out of the safety glasses and simply wore the frames over their noses.

Another organization outlawed baseball caps after an employee cut his head open and told his supervisor that he mistakenly thought his cap was a hard hat. Employees were extremely unhappy with this decision. The following day, nobody wore baseball caps. However, a number of employees chose to wear cowboy hats, sombreros, Dr. Seuss hats, and other caps/hats to protest the rule. Again, employees found creative ways to voice their displeasure about being ordered what to do (instead of getting their input).

Leading organizations implement programs to solicit employee input for safety, some of which include: safety suggestion boxes, near miss reporting, behavioral safety observation cards, and environmental audits. Efforts to solicit employee input boost morale and improve safety culture.

### Fundamentals of Effective Leadership

In addition to improved management systems and behaviors, here are some leadership and management principles from industrial/organizational psychology that have clear applications for safety culture improvement.

According to Yukl (1997) successful managers and leaders exhibit the following behaviors (the term *safety* is added for emphasis):

Behavioral Category	Specific Behavior
Supporting Behaviors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Show acceptance and positive regard <i>with safety</i></li> <li>- Be polite and diplomatic, not arrogant/rude</li> <li>- Bolster others’ self esteem</li> <li>- Actively listen <i>for safety</i> (maintain attention, suspend biases, use re-statements, show empathy, ask questions to draw the person out)</li> </ul>
Developing Behaviors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provide effective <i>safety</i> coaching</li> <li>- Identify <i>safety</i> training needs</li> <li>- Explain importance of <i>safety</i> training</li> <li>- Verify that <i>safety</i> training has been successful</li> <li>- Encourage <i>safety</i> coaching by peers</li> <li>- Provide effective <i>safety</i> mentoring (show concern for employees’ development, provide</li> </ul>

	helpful career advice, encourage enrollment in training, serve as a role model)
<b>Recognizing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Recognize employees' <i>safety</i> contributions and achievements</li> <li>- Actively search for <i>safety</i> contributions to recognize</li> <li>- Recognize <i>safety</i> performance improvements</li> <li>- Recognize commendable <i>safety</i> efforts that failed</li> <li>- Don't limit <i>safety</i> recognition to a few best performers</li> <li>- Provide specific and timely <i>safety</i> recognition</li> </ul>
<b>Managing Conflict and Team Building</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Foster mutual trust <i>for safety</i></li> <li>- Identify shared <i>safety</i> objectives and beliefs</li> <li>- Identify specific reasons for conflict</li> <li>- Consider a range of acceptable <i>safety</i> solutions</li> <li>- Use <i>safety</i> symbols to develop identification with the work unit</li> <li>- Use <i>safety</i> ceremonies and rituals to build teamwork</li> <li>- Facilitate satisfying social interaction</li> <li>- Use process <i>safety</i> consultants when appropriate</li> <li>- Do unconditional favors for others and show appreciation for favors given to you</li> </ul>

Managers who follow these behaviors will improve safety credibility, culture, and performance.

### In Conclusion

Dramatic improvements in organizational safety performance (and culture) have been made over the years. Unfortunately, many companies have difficulty moving beyond current safety performance plateaus. Improving management support for safety is critical to further reduce injuries and to optimize safety culture.

The current article addressed specific ways to improve management support for safety, including: optimizing safety leadership, improving managerial behaviors, empowering employees for safety, and enhancing safety management systems. Specific recommendations to improve safety management systems were also provided for safety training, incident analyses, discipline processes, and incentives. It is hoped that this article will help managers further improve safety culture and performance.

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