Optimizing the Safety Culture

May 1, 2008 12:00 AM, By Josh Williams, Ph.D.

Optimizing management support for safety is a key ingredient for safety culture improvement and the further reduction of injuries. Part 1 of this 2-part series provides some general managerial recommendations with an emphasis on improving safety management systems (e.g., training, incentives) to optimize safety culture.

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 percent from 1933-1997. This largely is due to increased cooperation between management and labor to improve safety, the development of federal agencies such as OSHA to improve safety and an overall emphasis on improving workplace conditions – such as supplying personal protective equipment – and safety culture.

Unfortunately, some companies have hit a plateau in terms of safety performance in recent years. Taking a look at safety management systems can help optimize the safety culture and keep your company moving in a positive direction.

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, and that:

- Appropriate PPE readily is 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.

By taking these steps, employee input into safety is increased, which shows employees that management cares about them and their safety. A positive safety culture is one where employees are actively involved in managing safety efforts, and safety management systems such as training and 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 or blame-oriented or inconsistent discipline procedures.

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

Fix safety problems in a timely manner – When employees' safety concerns are not addressed in a timely matter (or at all), employees immediately believe managers do not care. Beyond fixing safety problems, managers need to acknowledge that some concerns, such as updating

equipment or processes, can't be addressed overnight. In these cases, it is important that managers communicate to employees what they are doing to remedy the situation and let workers 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 and unnecessary chemicals from 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 often are inundated with safety graphs during safety meetings in an attempt 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 and hobbies. 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 that come 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, 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. (For more information, see sidebar, "Safety Training Guidelines.")

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 workplace 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 facility. Then, they placed a raffle wheel next to the television 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 injuries they could hide. Second, those who reported serious injuries were angry that 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 pulled 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 and use punishment sparingly and consistently. System factors contributing to injuries should be investigated, and any identified problems should be corrected.

For many companies, incident analyses yield a root cause of operator error with the predictable corrective action of retraining. Unfortunately, this "investigation" may ignore numerous system factors, such as lack of manpower or insufficient training, that also influenced the injury. Punishment normally is unwarranted if numerous system factors contributed to the injury, especially if the employee was unaware of the risk. However, punishment almost always is warranted in rare cases when employees violate cardinal sins, such as defying confined space permitting requirements or 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.

Sidebar: Optimize Safety Management Systems

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

Near-miss reporting: Have a formal process in place to report near misses. Managers/supervisors reinforce near-miss reporting with employees.

Minor injury reporting: Employees are encouraged to report minor injuries without fear of reprimand or excessive paperwork.

Incident investigations: Create investigation teams, made up partially of hourly employees, to thoroughly investigate all incidents and focus on system factors contributing to injuries. Hourly employees should feel comfortable discussing their injuries with the team.

Rules: Safety rules should be clear and practical. Consult hourly employees when developing rules and procedures.

Training: Keep safety training interesting and effective. New employees should receive sufficient training and more tenured employees should receive refresher training.

Hazard recognition: Employees need to understand the potential hazards of their jobs.

Communication: Keep employees up to date on recent injuries and near misses. Management should effectively convey information about safety improvement efforts to employees. Management needs to solicit employee input for safety and respond appropriately.

Feedback: Managers and supervisors regularly should provide both corrective feedback and praise for safety. Safety feedback among peers should be the norm instead of the exception.

Audits: Regularly conduct safety audits and inspections. Use audits to identify and correct safety hazards.

Employee involvement: Management should encourage employee involvement and ownership for safety. Safety teams should have hourly employee representation. Encourage employees to take personal responsibility for safety.

Sidebar: 10 Safety Training Guidelines

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 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.

REFERENCES

Geller, E. S. (2008). *Leading People-Based Safety: Enriching your Culture.* Virginia Beach, VA: Coastal Training Technologies Corp.

Geller, E. S. (2005). *People-Based Safety: The Source.* Virginia Beach, VA: Coastal Training Technologies Corp.

Geller, E. S. (2002). *The Participation Factor: How to Increase Involvement in Occupational Safety.* Des Plaines, IL: ASSE.

Geller, E. S. (2001). *The Psychology of Safety Handbook.* Boca Raton, FL: Lewis Publishers.

Geller, E. S. (1996). *The Psychology of Safety: How to Improve Behaviors and Attitudes on the Job.* Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press.

Geller, E. S., & Williams, J. H. (2001) (Eds.). *Keys to Behavior-Based Safety from Safety Performance Solutions.* Rockville, MD: Government Institutes.

Journal of the American Medical Association (1999). "Improvements in Workplace Safety-United States, 1900-1999." JAMA, 282, 319-321.

Williams, J. H. (2003). *People-Based Safety: Ten Key Factors to Improve Employees' Attitudes. Professional Safety (2)*, 32-36.

*Josh Williams, Ph.D., is senior project manager for Safety Performance Solutions (**Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.**). He can be reached at jowilli7@aol.com or at (540) 951-1032.*