Your Company Safety Culture and How to Improve It

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The goal of fully integrating safety into daily operations is admirable if not downright necessary. When fully integrated, the role of the Safety Department or safety manager may be limited to implementing policies related to documenting training and the safety program. However, it is too easy to jump right to that without putting in the hard work to actually integrate safety throughout the organization. Safety doesn't happen just because it is a stated goal. Additionally, creating a culture of safety often requires a substantial rethinking throughout the organization. It may take a substantial period of time to convince employees and managers by consistent action, policy and decisions that safety is not the opposite of production – that safe production is the desired goal, and that goal is backed up by decision after decision, by consistent daily actions that push the integration of safety into the daily work processes.

The Starting Point

The CEO has to be onboard fully and be an active participant; a decision-maker who takes the safety culture into account with every decision AND who demands the same from each successive layer in the organization. That requires good communication of that vision, candid discussions with subordinates, and a recognition that culture change is a process that takes time. That doesn't mean the change should be implemented slowly over a long period; it means the changes may not be fully implemented immediately as employees have to first recognize that "the old man, or old girl is serious" and then begin to see how their own actions and decisions impact the safety culture.

The Benefit of a Good Safety Culture

Like it or not, your company already has a safety culture. Whether it's good or not is the real issue. The value of improving the safety culture can be substantial. Injuries cost money – medical bills, insurance costs, lawyer fees, costs associated with replacement employees or additional overtime costs if existing employees cover for the injured person. Injuries also cause delays and disruptions in the short term and create potentially huge workloads later as the employee's recuperation has to be tracked/monitored. Additionally, if the employee is medically permitted to return to work, but in a limited capacity or with work restrictions, there is additional work for the supervisor and again for other employees who have to pick up the slack. Further, if there is a law suit that results from the employee injury, or even if the

employee retains a lawyer related to a Worker's Comp or Jones Act claim settlement, the amount of time demanded to deal with it all can be enormous.

Of equal significance, the injury can cause disruptions, especially if the injury was serious. You will want to conduct an investigation into the cause of the injury to help determine how to prevent it from happening again. Those investigations are necessary, but disruptive, and will create angst among other employees and supervisors. Then there is the fact that one of your folks just got hurt.

When the safety culture is good, the spillover effect can be substantial. The concept of "doing the right thing because it is the right thing to do" is very contagious. The employee who feels empowered to suggest a safety improvement and is recognized for it will also feel empowered to suggest process improvements or efficiency improvements to the daily work regardless of their time with the company or non-elevated position at the company.

The Concept of a Safety Culture

What constitutes a good safety culture? That's a workplace where employees feel safe and believe that senior leadership/management cares about their safety; where workers can and do identify and report safety issues knowing that the issues will be quickly and satisfactorily addressed; a workplace where there is alignment throughout the whole organization related to the common goal of everyone going home injury free when their work is done; where the safe way is in fact the way things are done and everyone knows it and expects that.

The emphasis is on culture. Rules, requirements, policies, procedures, PPE, etc., are all extremely important and need to be in place. What cements them into an effective system at the next level is when compliance with the rules and requirements and policies are the norm because everyone wants to comply.

Making Improvements to your Safety Culture

(1)   Senior Management Commitment: Senior management from the CEO on down needs to exemplify the culture change they are trying to achieve. That includes being consistent in communicating the safety culture in discussions and decisions. This effort is not about being a cheerleader attempting to inject excitement where it might be lacking. It's not about frequently saying "Be safe" or "Safety is our priority." This is about sincerity. This is about calmly and rationally convincing people that you mean it. The biggest challenge will be in convincing people that you are focused on more than the money and profit.

(2)   Employee Engagement: The employees need to be involved in improving safety. Make them part of the process. They have the most to lose and can have a lot to gain. They won't always have the big picture or make good suggestions, and some suggestions might come from an ulterior motive, but most will be sincere and helpful. This requires senior management to drop any attitude about shirkers or people faking injuries to cash in. Those people exist, but do not represent the vast majority of employees. The biggest challenge will be in convincing middle management that you are serious about wanting employee involvement.

(3)   Engagement of Middle Management: Here's the toughest crowd. They may be young and enthusiastic but short on experience; they may be set in their ways or resistant to anything that isn't "how we've always done it;" they may be just entirely focused on getting the job done. Middle management will make or break your safety culture. Invest time with this group to get them onboard. Convince them that you care about metrics beyond the bottom line. Invest in them through training – safety training, effective communications training, investigation training, root cause analysis training, safety auditing training, etc., to give them additional skills. Engage them and get their thoughts about improving safety. Make them put their new training to practical use for the company's benefit. Empower them to own the safety system and the safety culture. The biggest challenges will be in convincing middle management that improving safety will not create more work for them, and convincing them that you are okay with a drop in productivity if it comes with an improvement in safety.

(4)   Raising of the Bar: Improving a safety culture is not about salesmanship or getting all sensitive with the employees. It is about raising the bar. Expect more from all levels of management and employees. Empower them and encourage them, but in a structured way. Define and structure your safety program. Mandate safety meetings and prove your commitment by attending them. Keep a running list of action items from those meetings and ensure they get addressed. Tackle the tough problems in addition to the low-hanging fruit. Expect and demand senior and middle management to be engaged positively and ensure they are. Develop measures and metrics that legitimately measure your safety culture. A common mistake is only measuring the number of injuries. While that is one important metric, it is not the only worthwhile metric and paints an incomplete picture of your safety culture. Consider measuring the number of safety suggestions made; the number of safety innovations shared; the number of near-misses reported; the attendance at safety meetings; the attendance of senior management at safety meetings; the accuracy, timeliness and completeness of injury investigations; the results of any internal or external safety audits, etc. Ensure everyone knows what will be measured and how the metrics will be used. The biggest challenge will be concerns about the workload. As you engage the employees and middle management, address workload concerns right up front and throughout the process.

(5)   Putting your Money where your Mouth is: The ultimate proof for the skeptics at your company or on the ships will be senior management's willingness to spend money on safety. There will be suggestions made, or safety concerns identified that will take some money to address. Spend it, especially to fix safety-related things that are worn or broken. But also spend it on training and new safety equipment. In the long run, training is cheap and new safety equipment can have a big impact. For example, replace old and dirty high-visibility safety vests with new ones. They are relatively cheap and your company logo can be added for only a small extra cost. A little pride in appearance goes a long way towards creating pride in the company. Additionally, having your folks look more professional makes them feel more professional which helps with raising the bar.

(6)   Following through: Ensure that the safety system includes a mechanism to capture and follow up on safety concerns, suggestions, innovative ideas, etc. The lack of follow up or follow through on issues will quickly generate skepticism. Almost as bad as not following through, is to actually follow through but not let everyone know that steps are being taken to address the issue. Employees will assume that silence equates to no follow through, so when you follow through, make sure everyone knows it – not with fanfare, but matter-of-factly which will send the signal that no one should be surprised that actions are being taken. The biggest challenge will be handling the tough issues, where quick results may not be possible. In those circumstances, communication is even more important to let everyone know the issue wasn't forgotten.

(7)   Avoid the "fix and move on" approach: It's easy to declare a problem solved then rapidly move on. Senior management shows a more appropriate commitment when they take ownership for the resolution, measure the effectiveness of it and adjust it if necessary. That may be as simple as talking with the employees a week after a safety improvement was made to see if it worked as intended. Similarly, if someone raises an issue about something that was allegedly "fixed" previously, be very open in entertaining that concern. The biggest challenge will be in resisting the urge or suggestion to declare an issue "fixed" when it may not be. Be quick to add issues to the list of things requiring action, but be slow to remove items from that list.

(8)   Making Permanent changes in the Safety Program: There will be a suspicion by some that any effort by senior management to improve safety will be short-term. Don't live down to that expectation. You'll want to ensure that changes you make are permanent and reflect the way the company will conduct business going forward. Some of the permanency can be achieved through policy and procedures that memorialize the components, responsibilities and required actions as well as the company intentions. I recommend against a large kick-off extravaganza at the start of any safety system improvements. Those will appear too much like a short-term distraction before everyone

gets back to work and the way they've been doing things for years. The biggest challenge will be holding focus beyond the first month, but it has to be done.

(9)   Recognition: Recognition related to safety has traditionally been focused on recognizing zero injuries at the company level, department level, at specific locations, or sometimes at the individual level. There are a few problems with that approach. First, if the recognition is for a group, then everyone is rewarded equally including those people that didn't consistently use safe practices, or who just kept doing things the old way and just got lucky. Secondly, that is a lagging indicator and will not provide a solid indication of future performance. Thirdly, it does create some incentive to NOT report injuries. Lastly, that recognition tends not be very timely since you are always recognizing zero injuries for a time period that stretches back many weeks, months or even years. Scrap recognition programs that are solely based on the number of injuries. Replace them with a system based on the full range of safety metrics including whether all the required safety meetings were held, whether senior management was in attendance, whether all employees or all representatives attended, the number of innovative ideas submitted, the number of near misses reported, the number of safety concerns raised, etc. Reward the ongoing behavior you are trying to instill. In addition to that formal recognition, use some timely, easy and inexpensive but personal recognition. Let work groups select a "safety person of the month" to be recognized with a small plaque and a sincere handshake by the Captain or the CEO in front of his or her peers. For some employees, that may be the most recognition they have ever received. It doesn't have to be fancy or formal. It just has to be sincere. The biggest challenge will be the old school people who will have a hard time wrapping their minds around measuring safety culture and recognizing/rewarding a work group that possibly had an injury but has a better safety culture than other work groups.

(10)   Document, Document, Document: Part of creating a permanent improvement and raising the bar is through documentation. Draft (or modify the current) safety policy and procedures to capture the new paradigm and changes being made. It may not be fun or exciting, but it is necessary. The goal is not pages and pages of complexly numbered and interlocking procedures. The goal is simple, easy to understand requirements and procedures that cover things like safety meetings, safety issues, safety innovations, near misses, safe work procedures, safety training. The biggest challenges will be from those that have to write new procedures and from your personnel who will feel overwhelmed with reading and trying to understand new policies and procedures. Address those concerns right up front as you work to get everyone onboard.

(11)   Communication: Senior management needs to communicate the vision and the details. That needs to be done consistently and professionally as changes are being made and to sustain the effort. One key policy to communicate is a "Stop Work" policy. Empower each

supervisor and each employee with the ability to stop what they are doing as soon as it appears that something is unsafe or could be unsafe. Entrust them to make the right decision and trust their judgment. The company's trust in them will flow the other way as well and increase their trust that the company cares about more than the bottom line. The first time that someone calls a halt to the work for safety reasons, recognize them in a positive way. That will be the behavior that exemplifies a good safety culture, so reward it in a timely way. The detail of the recognition is less important than the act of recognizing someone. The biggest challenge to good communication will be middle managers who may be reluctant to pass on information to employees they feel don't need all that information to complete their work.

(12)   Accountability: Here's a tough part. All levels of management need to be accountable for following the safety policies and procedures. They also need to be accountable for getting onboard with the program. Supervisors also need to be accountable for ensuring safe practices are followed, safety meetings are held, injuries and near misses are investigated properly, and input from employees is truly welcomed. Further, employees need to be held accountable to follow safe practices, wear PPE, identify near misses, share innovative ideas, make suggestions, participate in safety meetings, etc. Resist the urge to shift into full and rigid enforcement mode. Communicate the expectations throughout the company. The biggest challenge will be a concern that accountability means people will get into trouble. Kill that idea by treating accountability as opportunities to explain, educate and demonstrate how the changes work and should be implemented. They are new, after all, and a little patience and coaching is appropriate. Culture change doesn't happen overnight.

The Next Step(s)

If you decide to improve your safety culture, start with the vision of your desired safety culture – not in terms of the structure of written procedures, but as a description of what you see as a good safety culture within the company and on your ships. Share that vision and solicit feedback. Adjust it as needed and get buy in throughout the organization. Start that dialog and build support while creating opportunities to address concerns and identify additional people who should be involved in the initial discussion. Then approach the CEO.

What's the upside? Fewer injuries? Fewer Jones Act or Worker's Comp claims? A workplace where employees feel safe and believe that senior management cares about their safety? Employees that know safe work practices are how things are expected to get done and are fully integrated into daily operations? A good safety culture? A safety culture that spills over into every aspect of how the company and ships operate?