

## Safety Culture-Beyond Compliance

Creating a safety culture has received a lot of attention over the years. Many perspectives exist on how to craft an effective safety culture within an organization. Regardless of the process or model, however, one thing remains constant; professionals and executive management teams see the benefit of creating a positive, employee-focused environment, but often do not know where to begin. When it comes to establishing a culture of safety within an organization, the focus tends to revolve around creating detailed safety programs and compliance documents, establishing safety rules and expectations, and designing extensive training programs for employees and workplace hazards.

These processes are necessary and meet governmental compliance, but lack the motivational and emotional component that drives the organizational culture. Safety must go beyond programs, policies and training. It must be rooted in every facet of the organization from the daily routine to the unobserved behaviors. By definition, culture is “the quality in a person or society that arises from a concern for what is regarded as excellent...the behaviors and beliefs characteristic of a particular social group” (dictionary.com, 2014). Therefore, to create a culture, one must create an environment that is based in excellence and focused on values and beliefs.

From a compliance standpoint, employees must be trained to follow specific rules and expectations. However, to expand the organizational safety culture beyond compliance an effort must be made to ingrain the core principles and values of the organization throughout all levels. Efforts must be centered on routine behaviors and not primarily focused on compliance and training. Although compliance and training are a part of the overall safety culture, the overarching strategy must expand toward the actions and behaviors of management influences, how management adheres to the rules, how the rules and behaviors are observed and enforced, and the level and scope of communication within the organization.

For example, when an injury occurs on the job, a common reaction is to place blame on the employee for violating a safety rule and assuming that more training is needed. There were rules in place and processes that should have prevented the injury. Although this may be one part of the puzzle, many organizations fail to get to the root of the problem. The investigation and the solution begin and end with training and discipline. In many circumstances, an underlying cause is contributed to the injury, but is ignored or not acted upon. This represents a safety culture based around compliance.

To go beyond compliance, additional questions must be asked to identify the real cause of the problem, or the behaviors behind the problem. Such questions must focus around the management commitment to safety: Is safety a lower priority or in competition with production (and if so why)? Were previously observed unsafe behaviors ignored (by management and co-workers)? Were employees asked or did they participate in the hazard assessment and/or job task performance evaluation? What is the level of accountability across the organization for unsafe acts, and how is safety communicated and to whom?

To take an organizational safety culture to the next level, there must be specific processes for both management and employees. Communication is often the main failure in any organizational system. It must be clear, concise and constant. The following strategies can help

to increase the level of communication within an organization and move safety efforts from compliance to culture:

- Utilizing self-audits or internal surveys can help shed light on areas for improvement and identify those strategies that are working well. Questions should be specific and offer employees opportunities to add additional information or explanations to his/her answers. Never take the feedback personally. Acknowledge and thank employees for responding to the survey and don't forget to follow-up. Do not be afraid to admit areas where the current system has failed and communicate plans for correcting the problem
- Cross training or job shadowing can help employees better understand what each department and job function is responsible for and provide a greater level of respect for individuals performing those tasks. This can also help eliminate the bickering and finger pointing between employees and departments.
- Diversify communication methods. Adults learn and absorb information differently. Diversifying communication will reach a wider range of individuals and improve the acceptance and retention of information. Look for opportunities to utilize printed materials (e.g., posters, newsletters, paycheck stuffers, e-mail blasts) technology (e.g., text messaging, video conferencing, web-based resources, online training) and face-to-face communication (e.g., classroom instruction, team meetings, toolbox talks, pre-shift conversations). Remember to keep communications simple, to the point and constant.
- Recruit others to the cause. Look for opportunities to involve other people within the organization to help spread the word. Communication is sometimes broken when the same message is consistently heard from the same individual. Something as simple as having an employee champion the cause and communicate the message can break down those barriers that come from organizational structure and internal politics.

Creating a culture of safety is not about rules and regulations; it is about attitudes and beliefs. It is a process that takes time and a conscious effort to achieve. Begin focusing energy towards developing effective communication strategies and organizational engagement to create an environment that is self-sustaining and profitable. •

**“Safety is not an intellectual exercise to keep us in work. It is a matter of life and death. It is the sum of our contributions to the safety management that determines whether the people we work with live or die.”**

**Sir Brian Appelton**

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Edited by : Hari K Taneja, Trustee,  
D. L. Shah Trust  
email: [dlshahtrust@gmail.com](mailto:dlshahtrust@gmail.com)  
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