



SAFETY LEADERSHIP

The Safety Experience

Safety programs should create positive experiences that motivate workers to get engaged and help the efforts be successful.

Terry L. Mathis | Jun 01, 2018

Marketing and sales experts have avowed for years that buying decisions are largely based on three criteria: value, price and experience. Over the past several years, the only notable change in this formula is that the experience has grown significantly while the other two criteria have diminished. This means the service and ambiance of a restaurant might be more important than the price and quality of the food.

So how does this apply to safety? I have been urging organizations for years to think of their workers as the clients of their safety programs rather than problems to be controlled. If this mindset is adopted and embraced, we must ask ourselves what is the worker's experience when they participate in our safety programs? Increasingly, this experience is going to influence buy-in and, ultimately, employee engagement in safety.

Not all organizations address safety the same way, but most have some common approaches, including training, meetings, rules and procedures, supervision oversight and disciplinary actions. Think about how each of these create experiences in your organization and how that experience influences your workers to buy in to safety.

Training

Safety training ranges greatly in quality and effectiveness. The majority of training we encounter is repetitive and monotonous. Classroom instructors often just go through the motions and computer-based training (CBT) is not updated enough. When we interview workers, they roll their eyes and tell us training is boring and they do not really learn anything they did not already know. A few concede the reminders might keep them more on their toes than if they had not had it, but virtually no one brags about its effectiveness.

I often ask leaders if their workers would pay to attend safety training and the most common reaction is laughter. Does this experience sell workers on your safety programs or convince them of its lack of value?

Meetings

I have attended some really well done safety meetings where plans are laid out and issues discussed. Sometimes a formal job safety analysis (JSA) is completed with input from workers. However, the majority of safety meetings are held to check off the box and document completion.

Sometimes supervisors repeat safety platitudes. These are not wholly without value since they do reflect the organization's priority on safety, but they don't do a good job of selling. The experience is one of going through the motions or checking off the box. The information is delivered but there is seldom any retention testing or quality rating of the training. Very few workers buy in to safety because of the safety meeting experience.

Rules and Procedures

Organizations develop rules and procedures to address workplace hazards that cannot be eliminated or reduced by physical or engineering interventions. The level of compliance with these rules and procedures varies greatly based on training, supervision and enforcement. But the overall effect usually occurs in one of two ways: workers regularly violate the rules with impunity and disregard them with increasing regularity, or they strive to comply and feel safe doing so.

There is danger either way: violations can lead to accidents but so can compliance if the rules and procedures do not address every risk contingency. In either case, the experience of compliance or non-compliance is not a compelling reason to buy in to the safety program. If all accidents come from non-compliance, then the experience can reinforce compliance. But reinforcement is not necessarily motivation, so compliance can create passive acceptance without really selling workers on the concept.

There is also the danger of workers limiting their thinking to compliance and ignoring risks not covered by rules and procedures, such as low-probability risks.

Supervision Oversight

If production supervisors also oversee everyday safety, workers have a clear view of how to comply. If, on the other hand, production supervisors oversee production and safety professionals oversee safety, workers find themselves in a conflict of interest. Safety and productivity compete with each other for priority. This often

creates a dichotomy and workers ask themselves if they should be productive or be safe.

In reality, what most organizations want is safe production. But if one authority promotes production and another promotes safety, which does the worker choose to deliver? This dichotomous atmosphere creates an experience fraught with conflict and feelings of helplessness that are anything but pleasant.

Amazingly few organizations are aware of this condition and actively address it. Failing to do so creates an experience that actively turns workers off to the safety effort.

Disciplinary Actions

Some organizations believe discipline is the best way to address non-compliance. Other organizations resort to discipline to “show people we are serious about safety.” Either way, discipline is used and creates negative side effects. First, discipline must be timely and consistent to be effective, and most discipline is neither. Second, even if effective, discipline tends to damage relationships and culture. The use of discipline for safety almost inevitably creates a negative experience that keeps workers from buying in to safety efforts.

Organizational leaders should ask themselves, “Does compliance with our safety programs create an experience that sells workers on the program?” But their answers should be supplemented with workers’ answers. Understanding the difference between willing cooperation and grudging compliance is a critical mindset of successful leaders. But a mindset is only the beginning.

Safety programs and processes should be designed to not only be effective and efficient, but to create positive experiences that motivate workers to get engaged and help the efforts be successful. Engagement has three levels:

1. Buy-in,

2. Participation, and

3. Ownership.

People take better care of what they own. Do your workers feel a sense of ownership in your safety initiatives, or do they simply use them while at work and leave them at the gate when they go home?

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