



THE MOST COMMON PROBLEM LEADERS MAKE IS TO PRIORITIZE PRODUCTION OVER SAFETY.

IS YOUR SAFETY PROGRAM PRACTICAL?

A safety program can't be everything to everyone, but that should still be the goal.

In most organizations, a safety program has many masters. Each silo and function have safety needs that should be addressed. Management wants results that enable the organization to compete and/or benchmark favorably. Legal wants specific rules and procedures to limit liability if serious injuries or damage occur. HR wants clear guidelines for hiring and onboarding new employees, and fair disciplinary policies for violators of safety rules. The safety professional or department wants support from leaders and cooperation from supervisors to reinforce the desired safety behaviors.

Supervisors want clear roles and responsibilities for their contribution to safety and clarity on the priority of safety in relation to productivity. Workers want sufficient training, clear expectations and available assistance in safety when needed. Many organizations have other groups with special needs and wants.

It is difficult for a safety program to be everything to everyone, but that should be the goal. A common complication to achieving this goal is that safety program modifications made for one part of the organization have negative impacts on other parts. These changes are often done with good intentions and the negative impact is not anticipated or addressed.

To avoid such complications, it is necessary to strategically design safety to anticipate how each change will impact other parts of the organization.

MANAGEMENT

The most common problem leaders make for others centers around giving priority to production over safety. A major oil company had 34 production charts and one safety chart posted at locations, yet leaders regularly stated that safety was the number one priority. The charts disagreed with the dialogue.

Another manager decided he should demonstrate his dedication to safety, and one of his chosen actions was to call everyone who had an accident or near miss into his office and discuss the event and look for lessons learned. In the manager's mind this

would send a message that safety had management support and he thought he was being successful as the number of events decreased. The reality was that workers were fearful to report accidents as they viewed the interview as being "called on the carpet" and was to be avoided at all costs.

LEGAL

A chemical company recently had three serious injuries within six weeks. The legal department pressed the leadership team to take immediate and strong action to prevent any more serious

injuries. The leaders put together a team with members from safety and legal, which decided to make rules and procedures more specific. The idea was to create clarity, but the result was just the opposite. One- and two-page procedures with common terminology were replaced with 20-40-page procedures with legal and technical terminology. The rewriting of procedures was not limited to the ones that had failed, but even the most effective procedures which had prevented injuries for years were replaced with the new, more complex procedures.

When workers in the field requested help to understand the new procedures, they were told there were not enough team members who had written the procedures to get to all the business units in a timely manner. When they then requested a one-page synopsis of each of these longer procedures, legal refused to provide them because they feared such a document could undo the protection from exposure that the longer document provided.

HR

The VP of HR at the company with the three serious injuries decided that their contribution should be to focus on increasing the negative consequences for rule and procedure violations. They issued a communication that anyone caught in the second serious safety violation would be terminated. They thought this would put workers on guard to always be on their best behavior. Workers who were disciplined for their first violation called their experience as "being half fired." They began to view the longer procedures as a tool to



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catch workers in violations rather than a tool to improve safety. Workers also ceased to view the safety department as the safety cops whose goal was to punish violators.

SAFETY

The safety professionals at this company had worked hard to convince workers they were friends and not foes. They learned a model for coaching performance and focusing workers on specific improvements. They had begun to build relationships and trust. The new procedures and discipline policies shattered their efforts. They set goals to regain their former progress but had little success in overcoming the impact of the other actions. The safety department implored management to moderate their efforts to address the accidents but found themselves blamed and their suggestions ignored.

WORKERS

Workers viewed the three serious accidents as a lack of onboarding training for new employees and didn't think managers, legal, or HR took any responsibility for that. From a review of the accident investigations, they were right in at least two of the three cases. They also felt that they were being blamed for the accidents and their own safe performance was totally unrecognized and unappreciated. Long-tenured employees who had felt great allegiance to

the company were looking for jobs at a competing company down the road and sharing information on open positions.

None of these negative impacts was deliberate but the actions that produced them were positively reinforced. Knee-jerk reactions to serious injuries can create more problems than solutions. This is especially true when leaders do not create an overarching strategy to direct the efforts. A part of such strategy development should always include an analysis of how each action can potentially impact other parts of the organization.

When managers react without thoroughly analyzing causation and influences on accidents, they can take actions that fail to address the root causes and don't improve safety. When legal focuses on exposure versus worker usability of procedures, they can damage worker competence and performance. When HR changes disciplinary policies, they can create a culture of fear versus improvement. When an organization plans a change, they should play devil's advocate and make sure they are not positively reinforcing something that will produce negative results. **EHS**

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