



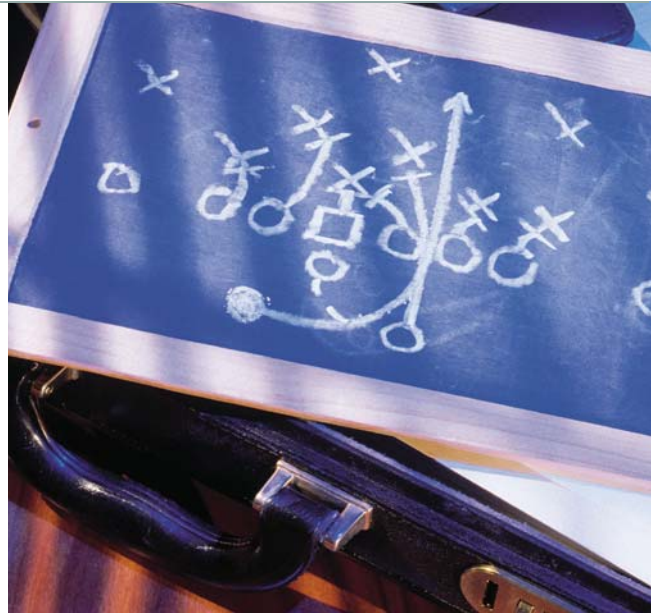
>> Supervisory Safety Coaching: **Growing a Safety Culture from the Middle Out**

Most safety culture improvement initiatives either start at the top or the bottom of the organizational structure, with executive coaching for senior managers or work force teambuilding for the rank and file. Some experts believe that safety begins with leadership; others stress that worker behavior has the most impact on safety. Both approaches can achieve improvement. However, there are organizations with good reasons to delay these approaches and start safety improvement in the middle.

While some companies believe in top-down strategies, and others support changes in worker behavior, sometimes the most effective strategy is to start safety improvements in the middle.

A recent client discovered in an assessment of its safety culture that managers did not realize the impact of poor safety performance on the organization. As a result, the client wanted to begin efforts by training managers. This organization is a division of a larger entity, which had absorbed the costs of safety into the corporate structure and insulated the division managers from the economic realities. However, after further analysis, it became evident that the managers had almost no direct contact with the levels of the organization where safety issues existed. Just as the managers were insulated from safety realities, the safety realities were equally insulated from the managers.

The next thought was to begin with the rank and file, and yet another barrier was identified. The work force of this division was a diverse group with multiple backgrounds and languages that would require significant work to form into teams. Moreover, the attrition rate was averaging 35 percent over a 4-year period. The existing culture was heavily dependent on the first-line



supervisors to train employees and to direct daily operations. The supervisors had received virtually no training when promoted from the work force in either supervision skills or in safety. The evidence indicated that working first with supervisors might be our best transformational opportunity.

There are other rationales for starting with supervisors. When looking for safety improvement on a budget, the potential impact for the modest investment is appealing. The average result with this approach is a 41 percent reduction in TRIR (Total Recordable Incident Rate) over the first 12 months.

Supervisory coaching is an effective intervention for a number of reasons. First, supervisors hold a position of significant influence in many organizations. Enhancing their skills quickly impacts the workplace due to their direct contact with work on a daily basis. Second, supervisors often are hungry for the skills they need. Unfortunately, most have been promoted up through the ranks with insufficient training. When they receive the training and recognize its value, they tend to put it to use immediately with good results. Third, workers look to the supervisors to understand the

priority of safety in the organization. Supervisors who demonstrate the importance of safety through constant and effective coaching set a level of expectations for safety effort that often provides early and sustainable results.

The skills that enable supervisors to be effective safety coaches are basic, and can help improve performance areas outside of safety. The supervisors often realize the potential impact of such skills in their daily work and become excited about the training. Other than attending training, the

supervisor does not have to invest more time to be more effective. In fact, the supervisor may gain even more time as training results in fewer performance problems and accident investigations.

The recommended training for supervisors is divided into two parts called "Coaching" and "Counseling." Coaching serves to build good performance and avoid problems, and counseling helps to solve performance problems if they occur in spite of coaching. There are several models

for each of these methods. There should be careful consideration to match each organization with the best model for their specific culture. Some organizations have already trained managers in a specific coaching and/or counseling model and supervisors should be provided the same training to ensure consistency. Let's look at the basic models for each method and discuss how they can be taught and put into practice.

The basic Coaching model has three parts: Focus, Feedback and Facilitation. Supervisors are taught the skills to determine transformational safety targets and focus workers on them. Developing this focus begins in safety meetings, but is reinforced daily in the workplace as the supervisor provides feedback to the workers. Supervisors are taught to identify and understand the influences of worker behavior and how to remove barriers to safe performance.

Focus is determined by performing a Pareto analysis of past accident data. From this analysis, supervisors can choose several safety targets on which to focus workers. The analysis helps to select the target with the most potential to prevent accidents. As the workers become more aware of the targets, their awareness is reinforced by the feedback from the supervisor as well as constant communication in safety meetings. A good focus produces quick results, and quick results produce further motivation to strive towards excellent safety performance.

Providing effective feedback unfortunately is a skill most supervisors lack. Supervisor training centers on developing this competency and creating a feeling of confidence in using this skill. If competency is not accompanied by confidence, supervisors hesitate to use their new skill. However, there is a risk that the classroom training may not fully transfer to use in the workplace. It is important that training not be so academic that supervisors fail to see how to apply it. Role playing and practice are essential to ensure that the training accomplishes this goal.

Facilitation often is an easy skill to teach to supervisors because they already utilize it. It is necessary to focus this facilitation on specific

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safety targets to see improvement. In addition, supervisors need to be reminded and sometimes taught to ask for help from management when they cannot effectively facilitate alone. Safety performance targets can be difficult or impossible to reach due to conditional, engineering or process issues over which the supervisor may have limited or no control. Involving managers in reaching these targets can both enhance facilitation and improve overall cooperation to solve safety problems.

Counseling is necessary when a worker has been focused, provided feedback multiple times and facilitation (barriers removed) and the safety performance is still not satisfactory. Like coaching, there are several models of counseling, and they also should be selected to match existing training, organizational policy or site culture. These counseling models can be used for safety targets or for violations of safety rules or procedures. The goal of counseling is to gain commitment for a behavioral change and establish enough follow-up to ensure that it happens. Most of what is commonly called "confrontation" has not proven to be as effective in our research as the counseling models.

Good counseling is a collaborative effort. Supervisors need to help employees see the rationale for change and involve them in formulating a plan to solve the performance problem. This process places the responsibility for change on the worker. The worker helps formulate the plan for change and then is accountable for carrying it out and reporting his or her progress to the supervisor. Many models make it easy for the supervisor to start out with verbal warnings and follow the progressive discipline policies of the organization if the workers fail to make adequate progress. Most supervisors have not received training to handling such situations and appreciate acquiring the skills and techniques to do so.

For some organizations, it makes sense to start safety improvements at the supervisory level. For all others, regardless of where you are on the journey to excellence, turning supervisors into safety coaches can be a logical next step. Few safety initiatives pay such big dividends for such a small

investment in time and resources. For organizations where supervisors are a hindrance to safety, this training can especially be effective. Teaching these supervisory coaching skills and asking that they be applied to safety can break down the production-first mentality. Moreover, applying these skills uniformly can open the door to more effective supervision in almost every area of performance.

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national expert and safety culture practitioner, he has worked with hundreds of organizations customizing innovative approaches to achieve and sustain safety culture excellence. He is a veteran of over 1,000 safety improvement projects in 23 countries and 21 languages. He has spoken at numerous company and industry conferences, and is a regular presenter at NSC, ASSE PDC and ASSE SeminarFest. He also is the author and presenter of over 40 webinars and podcasts.



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