How to Establish a Safety-based Culture

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Creating a Workplace Free of Illness and Injury Must Start at the Top

In a manufacturing environment, a company's greatest asset is its workers, and protecting those workers from illnesses or workplace injuries is critical to success. Operating an injury-free facility is no longer a dream. In many workplaces, it has become a reality – and not just for a year, but for several years running. Creating a workplace that is free of illness and injury begins with one crucial decision: making safety a core value. Better yet, it should be an organization's chief value.

Those workplaces that achieve the highest levels of safety have done so by creating a culture that embraces safety and empowers employees to maintain a commitment to safety in everything they do. The key is to establish a safety-based culture that starts at the top. In the past, manufacturers have viewed safety as a line-driven activity that must first be implemented at the bottom and work its way to the top. In fact, safety must *start* with an organization's senior management and a leadership team that demonstrates an active commitment to safety and promote sthat commitment with a passion, down and through the entire organization. To improve the safety culture of an organization, consider the following:

- The safety process must touch every person in the organization.
- Safety must be a permanent agenda item, discussed at the start of every meeting.
- Leaders must be held accountable for safety performance.
- Safety must be the operational fabric of a facility, not a separate function.
- Safety must be integral to every business activity.

OSHA concurs with this assessment stating that "the best Safety and Health Programs involve every level of the organization, instilling a safety culture that reduces accidents for workers and improves the bottom line for managers," concluding that "when safety and health are part of the organization and a way of life, everyone wins."

In this context, "safety departments" do not exist. Safety professionals have a vitally important role, but it shifts to a resource function that empowers others through capability development, coaching and mentoring. The very best safety programs are owned at the manufacturing line, utilizing production-level employees on teams to develop and implement safety processes. Safety should also be aligned with other business functions to ensure that it receives the necessary resources and attention.

To be successful, organizations should create career paths that turn employees into safety leaders by making sure that everyone is highly trained and motivated not just to *succeed*, but to *exceed* expectations. The focus should be on developing an environment and culture that supports the belief that every employee can create and maintain a workplace free of illness and injury. The result will be workers who feel ownership of the safety process and a shift from an independent to an interdependent work culture. This can help eliminate unsafe behaviors and conditions and lead to a focus on eliminating injuries entirely, rather than simply meeting regulatory requirements.

According to OSHA, when a company's safety culture is strong, "everyone feels responsible for safety and pursues it on a daily basis; employees go beyond 'the call of duty' to identify unsafe conditions and behaviors, and intervene to correct them."

With this in mind, consider posting the following safety principles throughout your facility to underscore the importance your organization places on achieving its safety goals:

- *Any person can and must confront unsafe behaviors and/or conditions. No one is authorized to disregard such a warning.*

- *No one is expected to perform any function or accept any direction that they believe is unsafe to themselves or others, or creates an unsafe situation, regardless of who directs such an action.*

- *Anyone who feels that a process is unsafe will shut down that process and work with appropriate team members to create a safe situation.*

Lastly, don't be afraid of making mistakes or missing targets. Both present opportunities for closing gaps in the safety process.

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