

Shaping your culture for safety

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Follow these five steps to achieve excellence

Culture is about the way things are done within organizations. It's also about people's thoughts and feelings toward safety, their beliefs, attitudes and expectations regarding everyday actions. The way each person thinks and acts toward safety shapes the beliefs and behaviors of those around them.

Positive cultural changes in safety can start near the middle of the organization, where you're situated. Senior managers are in the best positions of leadership to help support long-term cultural changes that can improve morale, quality and productivity. But it's up to people like you to get things started.

Five important dimensions

To get you going, let's take a look at some very concrete steps that you can take to help improve your culture and related safety systems. With space being limited, I've listed five of nine or ten dimensions that I generally use with my colleagues to help organizations shape their culture toward ongoing excellence in safety.

1) Safety orientation. Have you sat in on any of your recent safety orientations? How much "really good information" is provided that sets the stage for higher standards regarding safety performance? Orientations for some groups are simply a way to "dump" all their compliance training on workers in one or two days, leaving their heads swimming in rules and regulations. Rethink your safety orientations with outcomes and expectations clearly defined.

2) Reward systems. Supervisors and managers must be held accountable to perform the necessary work that upholds safety as a valued part of the organization. Performance reviews should qualify and quantify safety-related support in ways that affect promotions and pay. If your leaders continually fail to meet certain productivity, quality or safety goals but are still rewarded, productivity, quality and safety will be undermined - and so will the health of your organization.

3) Behavioral expectations. Earl is a construction worker who is about to jump into a trench. But first he looks around at his co-workers who have their hard hats on and O2 monitors around their belts. He looks to his new lead, Dominic, who let's him know that it's important to follow company procedures. In this situation, as with many others, cues we receive from co-workers can and will shape the way we think, feel, and act. Expectations have to be expressed with words and actions that show a real commitment to safety.

4) Collaborative-based activities. Create and nurture opportunities for people to understand the importance of working together. How are you helping to influence relationships so that individuals and groups know what team-based efforts are available? What's been accomplished to show the importance of working together as a group as opposed to individual efforts? There are countless ways to get people working together throughout your organizations to build pride in their safety-related work, and to improve overall performance.

5) Ongoing communications. Think about your communication strategies. The more ways you communicate safety the better. This means visual and verbal forms that paint a vivid picture in the minds of everyone, up, down, and throughout your organization. And remember, you need a clear message from your senior managers supporting safety.

Moving forward

Think about how your company currently operates in relation to these five dimensions and where you'd like to be. Organize a core group of leaders to chart out a new direction. These dimensions can be the start of shaping a better culture so that safety becomes an integral part of your company, not just an add-on or after-thought.

SIDEBAR: Tips

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