

Safety Cop



Personal Touch Wins Cooperation

Safety is more than machine guarding, personal protective equipment, chemical labeling or good housekeeping. It's also about positive employee relations that lead to positive attitudes, cooperation, and your workers' active participation in accident prevention.

Even the best-designed safety programs are useless without these key ingredients, so make sure you have a workplace culture that encourages participation in safety.

The Personal Factor

"It all comes down to the cultural elements that are in place: the type of communication that occurs, the organizational structure, management leadership and employee involvement, among others," says safety and organizational consultant Judith Ericson, PhD.

Management's message to labor, then, directly affects whether cooperation develops. As safety consultant and author Larry Hansen wrote, "What matters in effective communication is an understanding of what information employees need and want. Employees want to know how they're doing, what changes are planned, and what it means specifically for them."

The challenge is to communicate safety values effectively in order to build a cooperative safety culture. Several factors are needed to accomplish this.

Developing Cooperation

- Management should establish a written safety policy, post and circulate it. Reinforce it by maintaining a safe workplace. Show a genuine interest in your workers' well being.
- Encourage all employees to report observable hazards and recommend ways to eliminate them (physical conditions and unsafe acts). Talk with workers after accidents or near misses. Experienced workers should model safe behavior. In a fully realized safety culture, they can provide peer counseling when they observe unsafe acts (failure to use personal protective equipment, improper lifting, etc.)

- Involve employees personally in the safety process. Solicit suggestions from them for creating or revising safety rules.

- Supervisors must set a proper example by demonstrating that unsafe acts and conditions are unacceptable. Very importantly, give workers timely feedback, retraining or coaching on safe work practices. Impose penalties only as a last resort for workers who consistently fail to follow safety rules.

- Implement and enforce uniform penalties, such as warnings, memos, fines, suspensions, etc., for all workers. Hold supervisors accountable for their workers' safety. Explain that safety rules are designed for everyone's personal protection, and must be followed.

- A supervisor's personal attitude about safety is critical. Any deviation from safe practices by a supervisor will result in non-compliance by workers. A supervisor who sets a bad safety example should be subject to the same penalty imposed on a worker.

- Explain not only what to do and how to do it, but also why workers must do a certain job a certain way. It is easier to obtain buy-in when workers understand the need for a rule or procedure.

Encourage, Reward Safety

Many experts agree that employee recognition is important for promoting safety. Publicize your safety efforts and values by acknowledging those who work and encourage coworkers to work safely. Opt for a formal program with prizes; bestow a periodic "safe employee" award, or recognize a certain number of accident-free days. The goal is to motivate employees to maintain safe behaviors.

Upper management should present awards in general meetings. Afterward, spread the news through company newsletters, bulletin boards and, possibly, a dedicated spot of prominence for an employee framed photo or plaque. Fostering cooperation and giving feedback with a personal touch can go a long way toward establishing or reviving a safety program.

Safety & Risk Management

