"Safety Culture: It's not just another trend."

Safety culture is a term frequently bandied about in today's business world and sounds as trendy as "mission statements" were years ago. (Let's not forget "best in class".   First time I heard this at a company meeting I looked around to make sure I hadn't mistakenly wandered into a dog show. Really?)

What is a safety culture and if everyone is talking about this where do I get one? First every business has a safety culture. (1) Second why be concerned about safety culture? Independent research of OSHA VPP sites confirms that a strong safety culture has the single greatest impact on incident reduction. No other activity has such influence on safety.   This means an organized safety program along the lines of OSHA VPP produces results. (OSHA VPP utilizes many of the elements listed below.) (2) That is why a sound safety culture is valuable and effective.

Before discussing improving your safety culture ponder this; the late Peter Drucker said of management, "Most of what we call management consists of making it difficult for people to get their work done."   A functioning safety culture avoids Drucker's descriptor.

So how do you improve your safety culture? Fairly easily. First, top management must want do to this. Second, top management and labor need by involved. Safety culture is a joint venture. Third, the key words are persistence and patience combined with more persistence and more patience.   With management and labor collaborating combined with the safety manager providing technical guidance your safety culture can grow into the effective system implied in the name. But first some fundamentals.

Two guiding thoughts before proceeding to specifics: A functioning safety culture is one where both labor and management seek to identify and eliminate safety hazards is a common objective though each will have its own particular role.   Implied in the common goal is labor readily identifying hazards AND management providing effective help/pathway for fixing identified hazards requiring its involvement. (Labor should carry out repairs that are simple/easy and according to its level of expertise/knowledge thus reducing management's time handling simple fixes.)

Respect. This means both groups deal with each other with acknowledged respect.   If a good idea is raised it should be acted on. Ideas less than perfect, won't work for some reason or are infeasible management need explain/discuss why. Management need listen to labor's explanations as well to avoid a fix creating a problem. (Sometimes management's solution may create another hazard, interfere with production, make labor's job needlessly more difficult, etc.) This mutually respectful communicative process results in the transfer of knowledge and information missing in either group.

Roles:
• Management will oversee, act on, support and encourage safety manager, labor and subordinate managers.

• Labor actively participates and comments on the framework steps, implementation steps, procedures of safety culture steps, identifying hazards, making repairs and making repair suggestions.

• Safety manager provides technical (OSHA) advice, help in developing inspection documentation/repair, JSA development, encourage labor's continued active participation in hazard identification/remedies, develop training promoting the safety process and generally hand hold management and labor through this ongoing process.

Some guidelines for polishing a safety culture:

1. Top management need introduce the concept for safety culture to supervisors and labor.
2. Top management generates some guidelines initially reviewed and commented on by all levels of management and safety manager. Essentials only. Remember Drucker's comment.
3. Management introduces proposed guidelines to labor. Get labor's feedback and comments incorporating their comments into guidelines where appropriate.
4. Safety manager develops and conducts safety training for labor and management oriented toward guidelines, including:
   a. Hazard recognition.
   b. JSA.
   c. Steps labor follows in hazard identification, repair, follow up.
   d. Steps management follows assuring repair of labor identified hazards, follow up reporting to top management and labor on repair status.
   e. NO finger pointing. Objective is to find and fix hazards. (Yes, include this point in the training.)
   f. Remind all involved this process will take time, patience, persistence and is an ongoing effort.
   g. Don't hesitate repeating topics periodically. Use demonstrations and photographs.
   h. Be sure to include topics suggested by management and labor.
   i. Note: Training need be continuous, say ½ hour every week, two weeks or monthly. You decide what is effective.
5. Use of field audits is an opportunity to train labor on hazard identification. Audits are not a "gotcha" exercise. Labor and safety manager should be involved in audits.
6. Commence pre shift inspections. Takes a few minutes with labor inspecting for hazards and fixing them if possible. If not immediately fixable by labor the hazard need be referred to management that fixes them immediately.
7. If a serious hazard is found, labor need know it can postpone work start up pending repair. Management needs reinforce this belief and could present a safe and viable alternative. (No whining by manager just put on your thinking cap to remove the hazard quickly!)
8. If labor finds a hazard it has previously reported but remains unfixed, report it again. (No whining by labor!) Talk to your supervisor. (Remember the patience and persistence factor above.)

Communication. Means talking not shouting. Words AND deeds. An exchange of information upon which action is based. A two way street-labor to management and management to labor. Both need listen and do. (No, I'm not being preachy here just driving home the point.) Means showing or demonstrating.

This is a good time to explain "deed". Have you ever heard a supervisor tell his/her crew not to do something because it's too dangerous and then turn around and do it him/herself? Is this safe? What message does this send to labor about the employer's attitude toward safety? A corporate title does not convey immunity from a hazard or injury. Take fall protection for example. The law of gravity ignores job titles and years of experience so supervisor/management need obey all safety rules/policies too. No exceptions.

Potential challenges may involve identified hazards not easily, timely or economically feasible to fix. Rule number one: All hazards, once found, must be prevented, corrected or controlled either by engineering, safe work practices, administrative or PPE. (3)

But don't fret as there are many ways to eliminate a hazard.   For example: A sand plant rail car load out operation loading rail cars generated significant dust (silica). The vacuum collection system for the loading operation ceased functioning and the anticipated repair was costly and more time was needed to research effective solutions.   Solution: Management conducted an IH test demonstrating employee operator room seal kept dust out. An administrative procedure was implemented so employees left operating room to position loading chutes and commenced load out only upon return to the sealed room. Further IH testing showed problem dust levels abated with the passage of 15 minutes after completing load out after which employees could leave the sealed room to raise the loading chutes and close the car hatchs. Employees were trained on this procedure and signs covering rules of load out were posted. Mission accomplished. Safe production.

Open communication.   As hazards are identified labor can typically fix the simple ones quickly. Hazards requiring additional research or materials may mean a delay providing the anticipated fix.   Management should keep labor posted on the status of material orders, research pending repair so they know the status of hazard repair. Keep them informed.   Note, it's been my experience that labor often has a workable interim solution. Just ask them.

Part of open communication involves safety committees which are 80% or so labor and the balance management. Easy to form, easy to operate taking approximately 1 hour each month a well-run safety committee presents an excellent direct management/labor involvement in the safety system in a company. Such committees are excellent venues to exchange ideas, answer questions about a variety of safety related issues, keeps labor directly involved in company safety, great opportunity for interaction between management and labor in a quasi-casual business setting (management should consider springing for a couple of pizzas or burritos). Safety committees also increase labor buy in.

A final point about communication. Identifying hazards is not a secrete activity so don't treat identified hazards like an NSA operation. Identify, fix, report. But a little diplomacy goes a long way. If a supervisor is seen on site without his/her hardhat simply ask them if they need a

hardhat. No yelling or making fun. They likely simply forgot. No need to use all your tact at once.

One of my grade school teachers used to say "To be specific is terrific, to be vague is the plague". Mind reading is not a common forte of humans. If a hazard exists be specific identifying it. What is the hazard, where is it located, what makes a condition a hazard? This means labor and management will need practice taking a few minutes to learn the particulars of an identified potential hazard, viewing it in person may be helpful, then discuss how to fix it. Pretty soon this process takes on a life of its own and runs smoothly.

How do you know your safety culture is working? When labor starts showing you (management) a hazard explaining how they fixed it or have reported it and know the status of repair you know your safety culture has taken hold. And remember Peter Drucker, "Most of what we call management consists of making it difficult for people to get their work done." Make it simple and just do it.

1. "Stop Trying to Create a Safety Culture", Shawn M. Galloway, OH & S, Occupational Health and Safety publication, Mar. 01, 2013. http://ohsonline.com/Articles/2013/03/01/Stop-Trying-to-Create-a-Safety-Culture.

2. (U.S. DOL, OSHA, "Creating a Safety Culture, https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/etools/safetyhealth/mod4_factsheets_culture.html)

3. (DOL, OSHA "Hazard Prevention and Control", https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/etools/safetyhealth/comp3.html#Engineering Controls)

For more guidance on honing your safety culture the following references are provided:

Creating a Safety Culture, OSHA, https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/etools/safetyhealth/mod4_factsheets_culture.html

Safety Culture, Skybrary, http://www.skybrary.aero/index.php/Safety_Culture

Safety Culture Policy Statement, U.S. NRC (United States Nuclear Regulatory Commission), http://www.nrc.gov/about-nrc/safety-culture.html

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