

Under Construction

12 building blocks for world-class safety

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How do you build a world-class safety system? One that protects employees, provides a work climate of high satisfaction, and gives your company a competitive edge in the market through lower costs, higher quality, and higher production rates.

Try applying the following 12-step safety plan for success at your organization.

1) Check your culture.

Start at the management level, and work your way down. This can be done through perception surveys, direct questioning or observation.

To truly identify with a job, working that job is vital. Finish the job training currently offered, watch the employee at work, then work the job personally. That's how you'll really know where safety fits into that position.

But be wary not to spend too much time here. Basic information is all you need.

While on the job, be sure to ask questions to grasp the employees' perceptions of the safety culture. This is critical to building a trusting relationship.

Don't make judgments at this point. In effect, you're evaluating the safety culture set by management without asking direct questions about how employees perceive management's dedication for safety.

Note — In many union environments, you can't jump in and perform the job. In these cases, you need to thoroughly observe the workers and ask questions to gather information.

2) Review management systems.

Start by collecting information on your organization's goals, objectives, performance measures and training documentation. This will provide background of what your organization believes is important for success.

Review training for content and delivery. Determine deficiencies.

Review performance measures set by management. Look for safety aspects included in personnel reviews. Many times, safety performance measures are a vital part in reviews, but managers are not adequately trained to evaluate these measures.

What are the tools used to determine if safety objectives are met? Review the safety objectives set by your organization and decide if adequate resources are made available to meet these objectives.

Your analysis at this point will be used to "map" the remaining steps.

3) Assign responsibilities with management.

Since safety is often viewed as a function of one person — you, the safety professional — many managers are not aware of what's expected of them regarding the safety system. Discuss your background assessments with management. Then develop safety program responsibilities for all levels of the organization. This is the foundation to grow your safety system.

4) Set up a safety steering team.

This is the best way to assign responsibilities and get commitment. Keep membership small. It should be limited to the general manager (or highest level manager on site), safety (and environmental) professional, engineering manager, production manager, human resources manager and quality manager.

This team devises an organizational safety strategy and developmental plan with measurable goals, and the timing to achieve the goals. The team will provide necessary resources, capital, direction and strategy to achieve goals.

Your safety steering team initially benchmarks measurable safety aspects, such as incident rate, severity rate, types of incidents reported, types of jobs producing the incidents and other safety data points that your organization tracks.

5) Develop systems to measure success.

You might call this a safety scorecard system. Track more than lagging indicators — such as recordable incident rate or lost work day incident rate. Put a strong emphasis on leading indicators. Track safety participation from the workforce, inspections of facility and equipment, housekeeping, training and corrective action completion. By tracking leading indicators you'll see your lagging indicators improve.

6) Form a safety committee.

Committee members must receive adequate training. They must know how to conduct effective meetings and understand general safety and health topics.

As part of this training, it's necessary to outline roles, responsibilities and committee expectations/bylaws. Part of this may include a committee "mission" statement.

It's important for the success of any safety committee to:

- Define roles and responsibilities of the members (hourly employees should be leaders);
- Set committee expectations of members;
- Post and communicate meeting minutes and agenda to members.

7) Begin brainstorming safety ideas.

Keeping the safety committee focused on issues and projects that members can directly accomplish or control is key.

Have each safety committee member provide two or three safety-related projects that he/she would like to see accomplished. Review the list to determine which projects the committee feels it can directly control/ impact.

8) Provide additional training to members.

This can usually be accomplished through you, the safety professional, either by providing training — in topics such as ergonomics, OSHA topics, or hazard analysis skills, sending committee members to external training seminars/conferences, or through networking with other companies. Scheduling plant tours and meetings with safety committees from other organizations is invaluable.

9) Deliver safety training to management.

Without line management support, responsibility and accountability, the success of the safety system will be left on your shoulders, the safety professional. As anyone in this situation knows, this makes success extremely difficult, if not impossible.

Often, it seems safety takes a back seat to line management — but not because there's no commitment. Managers often don't have the knowledge or skills. To hold line managers responsible for the success of the safety system, a great deal of training is necessary.

Managers need to be trained in system tools such as incident investigation skills, corrective action development and tracking, safety scorecard measurements, and safety program responsibilities.

This can be done through regular management safety training sessions. (I find training retention to improve if spaced out over time.) Training sessions should incorporate system topics as well as detailed information on OSHA standards that can be applied directly to the work environment, through management inspections.

10) Train your workforce.

Avoid (as much as possible) training through video as the sole means of training. Besides boring employees, it doesn't allow for valuable interaction. Sometimes, video is very effective — just be careful using it as the only means for training.

Effective training can include a combination of methods. You might try computer-based training followed with regular line management "safety talks" with the department (5-10 minute daily/weekly talks) covering the same topic. Training by hourly employees, perhaps your safety committee members, can be very effective.

11) Develop your safety plan.

Safety plans should include items that are regularly needed for the system foundation — such as compliance and training. Also items to build for future success — behavioral safety tools, job safety and ergonomic evaluations. Your plan should be flexible, but not too much. Be prepared to change/modify the plan during regular meetings with your safety steering committee, but don't sacrifice achieving successes.

Where to start? First, set objectives and measures based on your company safety goals. Objectives must be attainable, yet aggressive. The objective must also “fit” into the overall business plan, considering production, quality and engineering.

Who determines your safety goals and objectives? Key members of your management team need to be involved. This “team” needs to review current safety concerns and decide where the company safety program should be, short and long term.

This is best accomplished with the safety steering committee.

12) Avoid lofty goals.

Incident rate goals are common and may be used, but often they are lagging indicators. Instead, goals should focus on measurable, leading indicators that, when successful, will produce a lower incident rate. Measurable goals can include items such as completion of required safety training, completion of job safety and ergonomic analyses, participation in safety or immediate incident notification and investigation. Remember, “what gets measured gets done.”

This brings us back to Step One: Assessment. The assessment is driven by your plan, and, at the same time, measures the accomplishments of the plan. Assessments may also show where your plan needs to be adjusted in order to achieve success.

This 12-step safety plan for success can be applied to any environment, and successful results will be achieved. But keep in mind that becoming successful in safety may not be “just this easy” — still, significant improvements can be achieved.

This is not a plan that stops. It’s a continuous improvement process. At least each year, the same 12 steps must be applied, reviewed and modified where necessary. Your safety plan can be reviewed and modified more often as determined by the steering committee, or as a part of corrective action to a significant incident.

SIDEBAR: Who’s at the wheel?

Your safety steering committee should be limited to the:

- general manager (or highest level manager on site)
- safety (and environmental) professional
- engineering manager
- production manager
- human resources manager
- quality manager.

SIDEBAR: Want a safety committee that gets things done?

- Define roles and responsibilities of the members
- Hourly employees should be leaders
- Set committee expectations of members
- Post and communicate meeting minutes and agenda to members
- Avoid creating a safety list of items that need to be accomplished — safety work orders
- Committee members do not have the authority to direct maintenance work orders or management system flaws
- Create a list of three to five items that your committee agrees can be accomplished by members
- Schedule plant tours and meetings with safety committees from other organizations

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