

Senior leaders in safety

Real world examples of making a difference

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Senior leaders can dramatically improve safety performance in their organizations by fostering a high-performance culture. Going beyond vocal support, leadership involvement uses a deliberate strategy to elicit the leadership behaviors needed to build a high-performance culture in the organization. By high-performance culture we do not mean something vague, but specifically a culture that exhibits high levels of the nine variables we described in the previous article of this series. These nine variables - teamwork, workgroup relations, procedural justice, perceived support, leader-member exchange, management credibility, organizational value for safety, upward communication, and approaching others - have been empirically demonstrated to predict safety performance.

The link between leadership activities and a high-performance safety culture is more than anecdotal. In working with more than 1,450 sites we have repeatedly seen that one of the biggest differences between sites that struggle and sites that succeed is leadership behavior. This is consistent with the critical success factors we discovered by comparing matched high-performing and struggling sites (*Hidley, J. 1998. "Critical Success Factors for Behavior-Based Safety" Professional Safety. Vol. 43, No. 7 (July 1998): 30-34.*).

This third and final article in our safety leadership series examines three organizations that are applying leadership development as a technique to build high-performance culture and enhance the safety functioning of their organizations.

Scenario 1 - Rebuilding the culture

When new management took over the operations of this industrial service company, one of their first challenges was to rebuild the company's morale and safety culture. A combination of poor safety practices and infrastructure problems had eroded morale and trust, indicating poor performance in the future. Instead of taking an "enforcement only" approach, the management team chose to adapt a leadership approach. Senior leaders, middle managers, and supervisors would all take active roles in safety improvement.

To kick-off this new approach, the leadership group had the supervisors trained to use behavioral science tools to build safety with their employees. Then senior leaders met for one day at an off-site workshop with middle managers from all of the organization's sites. They used the workshop to generate a common understanding of what they needed to do for safety and how they should go about it. This involved specifying three high-impact leadership practices that all leaders and managers would work to inculcate into their organizations. After the workshop the senior leaders and managers were coached on how to use behavioral science tools to implement the leadership practices in their organizations. Each manager applied the leadership practices, which then became the focus of his or her safety accountability.

As a result of daily work on their leadership practices and implementation of their various action plans, the company is reporting dramatic changes in its safety culture and a decreasing incident frequency. In particular, the company is showing significant increases in such key organizational factors as workgroup relations, management credibility, upward communication, and organizational value for safety. The company has since formalized this leadership safety process.

Scenario 2 - Enhancing existing initiatives

This flexible packaging manufacturer was already considered highly successful when site leadership recognized an opportunity to improve safety by implementing an employee-driven safety process. Senior leaders at this site were trained to support the new process and to further develop their own skills. Using a workshop approach, the leaders identified a set of practices they could use to strengthen their organization's culture. Individual leaders reviewed their performance on a leadership survey and determined how to use the project to develop their skills. Individual leaders then tracked how they implemented their own key leadership behaviors, quantifying how they're being accomplished and looking for impact on the employee-driven safety process.

The effect of leadership has been increased organizational support surrounding all safety activities. Managers and supervisors throughout the organization are getting involved in the safety improvement initiative in new and significant ways. Employees recognize the effects of this involvement; it is a new kind of collaboration.

Scenario 3 - Moving beyond safety

This site had successfully implemented a safety improvement process several years earlier and recognized that the method could be useful to other opportunities. They were strategically positioned to rapidly expand their market share, a risky but potentially profitable move. Success would depend on how successfully they could adapt to the changes such an expansion would entail. They didn't want to miss their opportunity, so to increase the likelihood of success they chose to train leaders on how best to implement the changes needed.

In this case, an assessment of cultural and leadership vulnerabilities and strengths was completed at the start of the project. A model of the improvement needed was developed and leaders were trained to develop the skills identified through the model. Next, they developed an action plan for facilitating the needed changes in their respective areas. Finally, a committee was formed to troubleshoot problems with a particularly difficult change area. This committee drew upon the expertise that had been gained through their experience with safety. While this project is still in its early stages, site leaders are confident that the foundation they built in safety will help them achieve excellent performance in areas beyond safety.

The benefits of leadership involvement don't end at safety. Sites that show attributes such as trust, good communication, management credibility, and organizational value for safety outcomes turn out to be better overall performers than sites that don't have these attributes. And the good news is that these are attributes that leaders can deliberately build into their organization's culture.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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