

Activating Executive Safety Leadership

Seven strategies for developing strong safety allies in the executive suite.

by Robert Pater

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When I was a 12-year-old preparing for the "rescuing" section of the Red Cross Senior Lifesaving test, I remember my instructor telling me, "You may think that when you swim out to save someone who is drowning, they'll be happy to see you and cooperate in anything you do to help them survive. But this isn't the case. I've been a lifeguard and I know that in these situations they usually panic, climb all over you and, if you're not careful, wind up drowning you both."

Isn't this sort of like being a safety professional? I frequently hear, "I'm trying to do my work – two persons' jobs actually. I'm trying to help employees, supervisors and managers, and I feel like I'm not getting their cooperation. I can't get senior executives to do what they should in safety and they still demand superior results."

If you agree that active executive leadership is one critical component of achieving a strong safety culture and effectiveness, consider seven strategies that have worked with senior executives in companies worldwide.

1. Communicate as a leader, not as a safety technician. Don't assume managers will be as passionate about safety as you are. Similarly, avoid equating safety only with injury prevention or cost containment. Focus also on ways safety helps drive overall managerial/organizational goals and objectives, such as efficiency, retention of valued workers, involvement, receptivity to change and more.

Bob Liott, corporate safety manager of Jo-Ann Stores Inc., contends, "Compliance is the minimum standard. You've got to develop rapport with executives and sell safety to them as furthering their organizational goals."

2. Cultivate a mentor – placed as high up as possible in your organization – who can both tune up your executive communications and influence his or her peers to promote safety. If the mentor is not a safety expert, you might translate any question you put to him/her in terms of production or quality issues (and then you translate the answer back into safety terms).

3. Think loss control. Help prevent company executives losing managerial credibility by offering a different perspective on strategies you suspect are unlikely to work. Frederick Herzberg, a pioneer researcher in workplace motivation, wrote that many executives spend so much time in meetings/planning/on the phone that they become disconnected from what is really going on in their organization. Help reconnect them.

In one heavy manufacturing company going through protracted contract negotiations, a senior manager was frustrated by the number of accidents in the employee parking lot. He wanted the safety department to write a set of policies and procedures for driving into and out of parking spaces and considered requiring every worker to put yellow tags on their cars.

The safety manager knew that this would likely backfire on many levels. He applauded the executive for his emphasis on safety, let him know he was similarly concerned, communicated the likelihood of potentially explosive reactions when employees were already on-edge (giving examples of what he'd heard) and then suggested other ways to reduce accidents that were less likely to result in employee pushback. These included placing curved mirrors for better vision, bringing attention to this in a way that workers saw as beneficial to them and training. The safety manager then asked the executive for his decision. The executive chose, action was taken, potential fuel was not thrown on the fire and the safety professional's relationship with that executive progressed.

4. Have a visibility strategy. Develop methods where executives can be seen leading safety that don't require significant time expenditures. For example, these can include showing up for a small portion of safety meetings, using them to lead off a safety video or sending a safety message with their e-mail signature.

5. Make it easy for them to lead. Ghostwrite a safety message from them or feed them info they can talk about. A safety professional in one wood products company created a weekly talk for the plant manager to give on "Our Safety Successes." This took very little of the PM's time, he and the workers felt good about it and it helped get the PM out on the floor, identifying with safety.

6. Set clear and realistic expectations of ROI and needed support with executives. That way, for example, they understand that a carpal tunnel syndrome prevention intervention likely will show statistical results only after a minimum of several months. They might see more reports of CTS just after initiating the intervention, but this can save time and money by catching problems at an earlier, more manageable stage.

7. Systematically chart and internally publicize successes, so they know they are leading a "winner." Help them associate their safety efforts with improved motivation, involvement or receptivity to change.

These are only a few proven methods for activating senior executives as proponents of safety. Develop your ability to lead leaders who, in turn, set the tone of high-level safety, support your mission and thereby make your own work more fulfilling and effective.

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