PETERSEN'S PAGE: Building a safety culture
It will be the measure of your success

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Building a positive safety culture in an organization starts with leadership — a leader (or leaders) perceives the status quo is not good enough — the way things are can and must be improved. The impetus for change is more often personal than financial, it seems.

Then it becomes essential to define current reality in the organization — where do we stand today in each aspect of the safety effort — where are the strengths and weaknesses?

In making these assessments, people at each level of the organization need to be surveyed, for there are usually vast differences of opinion at the different levels.

Once reality is determined, the organization and its leaders can assess the chasm between today and the vision of where the organization should be. In earlier articles, it was suggested some criteria for safety excellence based upon research. One large study of a number of excellent companies suggested these categories as important:

Safety leadership

- Roles and responsibilities should be clearly defined for everyone from the CEO to the line supervisor.
- For each important corporate safety initiative, identify a safety champion among top corporate managers and task them with driving that initiative.
- Ownership by senior management of safety programs and performance should be visible to the organization. Active accountability can be demonstrated through discussion of performance with peers at management review meetings.

Safety performance – incentive/recognition/counseling

- Leaders in safety performance use metrics to effectively drive their continuous improvement efforts. Leading indicators are used to predict changes in safety performance. Monitor safety performance versus program implementation at all times.
- Performance targets are well defined and clearly communicated. The targets challenge the organization to continuously improve. The best companies review and reset expectations according to feedback from employees, managers, the performance metrics, and their competition.
- Safety performance is rewarded and tied to compensation and/or operating budgets.
- Discipline is assessed consistently according to well-developed guidelines.

Communicating/sharing of information

- Companies that are leaders in safety communication solicit feedback from the recipients of safety information; they put senior managers on the plant floor to ask questions.

Training for safety

- Track training requirements to determine the status of training needs and level of compliance.
- The leader in training solicits feedback from course attendees and the course sponsor. Safety training is evaluated at the time of information delivery as well as after the fact.
- Behavior observations are used to indicate whether attendees retained the information presented in the training program. Observations are documented and used to modify the training program if needed.

The current crop

In looking at the safety systems present in organizations today, they seem to fall into a number of types:

1) Build a culture. In the "right" culture behaviors will be appropriate. This is perhaps the least-used approach and the only one that makes real sense — to start by building a safety culture and then building the system elements that fit your culture and your management philosophy and systems.

2) Comply with the government's definition of a safety program. The government has provided a model program, so just do it. A common approach (required in some states). If you believe the government knows your company, your culture, your people better than you, your management and your people do, it could make sense, but it does fly in the face of much research that says there is no one right way.

3) Buy a packaged program. There are plenty out there — from the state, the federal government, from consultants, on the Internet. Are they right for you? Do they fit your culture? You decide.

4) Use a behavior-based approach. Concentrate on employee behaviors by defining desired behaviors and observing employees (measuring the behaviors). This has been popular for the last ten or more years, but perhaps is now fading a bit as the behavioral people have shifted their emphasis to management, leadership, accountability, culture, etc.

5) Do what has always been done (whatever that may be). Still the most popular approach and the least valuable in terms of results.

6) Do nothing. Perhaps no serious loss (or losses) will occur and perhaps OSHA will not appear. Also extremely popular — and very easy to do.

Of the above six approaches, only #1 makes sense — to assess your culture today, to determine where you would like it to be, and then take the steps to get there.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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