



A tactical framework addresses risk perceptions, risky practices

A plant manager recently shared an observation of a new employee taking a significant risk. After the manager spoke with the new employee, it became clear the employee was unaware of the danger. The manager shared with me, “I thought we were past this. We hadn’t done that in years.” In talking through the issue with the manager, it became known that no one was sharing these risks we never take during new employee onboarding. The onboarding systems were creating human error traps.

How well are you onboarding new employees to the stated expectations and practices that are perhaps taken for granted? When safety practices become cultural (“the way we do things around here”), sometimes these practices are forgotten about when educating and training new employees. Leveraging the “Plan, Do, Check, Act” methodology, what follows is a process developed to help organizations facing new employee training and onboarding challenges.

Plan: Gather and review data. Conduct “acceptable vs. unacceptable” risk conversations with existing crews. Ask them, “What do you consider as an acceptable risk? What is unacceptable?” This perception informa-

tion gathered from a sampling of employees (eventually from all) and then from management will tell you their perspectives and how well aligned employees are with management. Conduct observations of work practices. Discuss why certain precautions are taken. If a risk or deviation from expected practices is observed, work to identify the influence on behavior. Create a list of perceptions that need to change and influences that need to be addressed.

Do: Develop corrective actions. Changing perceptions requires new information and new experiences. Identify what information would be necessary to lead to a change in thinking. Also identify what experiences the individuals would need to have to change the undesirable perceptions about risk. Develop a list of actions to address the influences on risk. What makes it difficult or impossible to conduct the work according to plan within the work system and environment? What might hinder the desired safe practices from occurring all day, every day? Execute the chosen action plans to improve culture, work systems or work environment.

Check: Did it lead to an improved outcome? Repeat the “acceptable vs. unaccept-

able” risk conversation. Did the corrective actions change perceptions? Conduct observations of work practices again and discuss them with employees. Did the corrective actions address the influences on behaviors? Is the work regularly occurring to plan with no recent deviations or surprises?

Implementing the “Plan, Do, Check, Act” methodology will help organizations face new employee training and onboarding challenges.

Act: Develop a sustainable process. Involve experienced workers in creating a list of risks “we do not take,” as well as the “precautions we do.” Consider a general list, then work to make it equipment or task specific. Develop a process to easily enable reporting when deviations from expected outcomes occur. With examples, make it clear when it is desirable to stop the equipment or the job. Add this information to new hire onboarding and consider having

experienced employees cover this with new employees. Develop a mentorship process between new and experienced employees, so this can be reinforced throughout the first several months or longer for more complex tasks. Continuously improve hiring for safety. Develop behavioral interviewing questions to gain insight into candidates’ perspectives on safety and their tolerance for risk before extending employment offers or accepting temporary workers into the work environment.

As outlined, this process has worked well for several clients. Feel free to continuously improve it by using it as a framework to customize the approach for your specific needs.

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