

Engagement: The Fourth Component of Safety Excellence

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Fri, 2016-01-29 11:05

The quantity and quality of employee engagement will determine the level of effort needed to move an organization toward excellent performance.

In previous articles, I labeled the first three components of safety excellence as strategy, assessment and coaching. The fourth element is both an extension and implementation of the first three.

Astute leaders and safety professionals quickly realize it is the workers, and not just themselves, that must achieve excellence. There needs to be a strategy to help workers achieve excellence, an assessment of their current performance levels and coaching to help them improve from that current level. But ultimately, the quantity and quality of employee engagement will determine the level of effort needed to move an organization toward excellent performance. Engagement begins in the development of the first three elements.

Strategy: Organizational leaders should develop a strategy to engage employees in safety.

This strategy should begin with a vision of what excellent engagement would look like.

What beliefs, perceptions and values would engaged employees ideally have? What opportunities should employees at all levels have to actively participate in meaningful safety activities? What input should be sought from employees to help design safety efforts? How much input will it take to develop a sense of ownership in safety efforts from employees? Once these questions are answered, a plan of action can be developed to make it happen over time. Like a military strategy wins a war one battle at a time, a worker engagement strategy should be executed one step at a time. It is critical to not do too much at once.

Assessment: Once the desired state of engagement is defined and envisioned, the organization should assess the current state of engagement and all safety programs and processes that influence workers. The findings of such an assessment might necessitate changes or adjustments in strategy, but this does not mean that assessment should precede strategy. We have found that organizations that assess first tend to develop gap closers at current levels rather than true strategies to achieve excellence. It is important to envision the desired state before assessing the current state. If good engagement opportunities already exist, they can be used and possibly expanded or supplemented. If current programs to foster engagement are not producing results, they can be modified or abandoned.

Coaching: Knowing the desired state and contrasting it with the current state helps define the targets needed to coach workers. Specific improvement targets are key to effective coaching. Asking supervisors, managers or peers to coach workers toward some nebulous and poorly defined goal of safety usually is ineffective and frustrating. Such untargeted coaching actually can damage relationships and the safety culture rather than improve it.

Once safety improvement targets are established, everyone asked to coach in the strategy for engagement should be trained in effective coaching techniques. Very few leaders have received any formal training in performance coaching. Developing these skills is important, but so is the alignment of efforts among the organizational culture.

Engagement: Armed with a strategy, an assessment and coaching ability targeted toward high-impact improvement potential, the organization is ready to achieve greater levels of engagement. The strategy should have outlined what good engagement looks like (i.e. what attitudes, perceptions, values and behaviors embody this engagement). The assessment should have revealed to what extent workers already have these desired qualities of engagement and which ones need to be started or enhanced.

The specific areas that need to be addressed should have become improvement targets, and coaches should have been focused on these targets during and after their coaching training. Good coaches will positively reinforce these factors when they see them and ask why these factors are lacking when they observe the absence of them. The knowledge of what is influencing these attitudes, perceptions, values and behaviors should be used to facilitate the development of these factors of engagement.

Attitudes are resistant to direct efforts to change them. They largely are based on personal experience and peer influence. They also can be influenced by official communication from organizational media or leaders, but only if the trust levels between workers and the organization are high. Changing attitudes will take time and usually is best accomplished by a combination of good communication and sharing of experiences that reinforce the desired attitude. Treating workers with respect also is a critical factor in changing attitudes.

Perceptions are based on personal experience but also on available information. More and better information potentially can change perceptions. Changing the workplace realities that create personal experience also can change perceptions, but usually over a longer period of time. While improvement efforts will change workplace realities, most organizations increase communication of information to enhance perception changes and don't rely on organizational changes alone.

Values fall into two categories: universal values and situational values. Universal values apply in all situations. Situational values apply only in certain instances where multiple priorities might conflict.

Organizations tend to espouse both types of values and assume workers will adopt them. Organizational values don't automatically become personal values.

Organizations consistently must demonstrate values over time to get worker buy-in and to influence them to make personal decisions according to those values.

Behaviors are affected by all these factors as well as workplace conditions, leadership styles, culture and numerous other influences. Changing behaviors within a workplace culture is best accomplished from within the culture rather than through outside influences. Many processes have been developed in the safety community to systematically accomplish behavioral changes.

Organizations can improve safety performance through a number of programs and processes. However, the highest levels of excellence tend to happen when workers truly are engaged in safety efforts. Enhancing employee engagement is not a simple, one-step process. It must begin at the strategic level and follow a path that is systematic and tenacious.

Engagement is not impossible, nor is it utopian. Many fine organizations have achieved it and reaped the huge benefits it brings.

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Source URL: <http://ehstoday.com/safety/engagement-fourth-component-safety-excellence>