



When Site Managers Undo Corporate Safety

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Safety strategy should begin at the corporate level. The leaders of the organization should direct the formulation of an overarching safety strategy that guides activities and determines the fit of each program and initiative. Everything done at the site level should be held against the standard of that strategy.

When the site fails to follow the strategy, there should be decisive and timely corrective action. When there is not, the strategy fails to be executed and the results of this failure often manifest themselves as poor safety performance or, even worse, as catastrophic events.

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Sadly, most organizations don't have a true safety strategy (or have a flawed or incomplete one). However, having a safety strategy at the corporate level is not a guarantee that it will affect performance. Many strategies that start at the top of the organization end there as well.

The effectiveness of corporate strategy at the site level is dependent on acceptance and support from site management. Many site managers are safety champions and welcome a strategy to guide their efforts, but some are ineffective in their efforts, and some deliberately deviate from the strategy. Site managers who fail to execute corporate safety strategy usually do so in one of three ways: delegation, subjugation or diversion.

Delegating Safety

It is not unusual for site managers to delegate safety to a safety professional or specialist. In many cases, the safety manager follows corporate strategy and spares the site manager many of the details of doing so. However, when managers completely divorce themselves from the safety efforts, the safety professional can become a scapegoat rather than a resource. Managers can make it difficult or impossible for safety specialists to do their job and then blame them when results are not acceptable.

When site managers have had a long tenure with several rotations of safety professionals, and the site still is not performing well in safety, the problem often is the manager and not the safety personnel. Managers who do not take a personal role in safety send a message to the whole organization that safety is not what the organization truly is about.

Subjugating Safety

Delegating safety is not nearly as bad as subjugating it. Even safety-conscious managers can send the message that other priorities are more important. The simple volume of communication about other priorities versus safety can reinforce that message.

But some managers don't stop there. They personally and directly send the message that safety must take a backseat to more important matters. If site managers don't get what they want from site safety professionals, they can pick and choose until they find a safety person they can control and keep out of the way of their true priorities. When workers exercise their rights to stop jobs for safety, site managers have the power to write them up for insubordination, assign them dirty jobs or deny them certain benefits.

Site managers also can subjugate safety in more subtle ways, such as reducing or cutting off funding for safety functions or equipment, making it difficult to attend safety meetings, ignoring safety suggestions or reducing all safety training to redundant computer-based modules. Some managers change the subject when safety is brought up, or voice the opinion that all accidents are the fault of careless workers and don't require managers' attention except to fire the guilty.

When managers send the message that safety is not important to them, workers receive the message. Once this message is received, all other messages promoting safety seem disingenuous. Interviews with workers quickly can identify problems with managers and safety, yet many organizations don't utilize such interviews as a part of regular safety audits.

Diversion

Some managers successfully avoid blame for safety by diverting attention to other aspects of business at which they excel. Companies

often are hesitant to risk losing high producers who simply aren't excellent at every aspect of business. A manager who can increase efficiencies and profits but can't seem to get a handle on safety often is given another chance, or even a waiver.

If accountability for corporate safety strategy execution goes through production management hierarchy, this often is the case. Both the site manager and his boss have multiple responsibilities and accountabilities. If the corporate strategy does not contain strong language establishing safety as a value or priority equal to or greater than productivity, it is easy to excuse poor performance in safety as long as there is strong performance in the organization's focus areas.

Blaming workers for accidents is another form of diversion. If accident investigations automatically place blame on individuals and ignore contributory causes and influences, this often is a sign of such diversion. Some site managers even will blame the corporate strategy for their failure even if they are not following it. Managers who seek to fix the blame rather than fixing the problems often are managers who are failing at safety or trying to shift the focus to avoid culpability themselves.

Another form of diversion is when managers simply get busy or overwhelmed with other priorities and fail to give safety enough attention to succeed. Mechanical problems, poor engineering or design, labor issues or inefficient processes can dominate managers' attention. Safety, along with a host of other priorities, can be put on the back burner when immediate and urgent issues get out of control.

A good safety strategy at the corporate level should include channels of accountability and methods of early detection when the strategy is not being followed. Site managers who fail to follow the strategy for any reason quickly need to be identified and their course corrected. Most site managers are great assets to their organizations and execute the safety strategy with precision and creativity. However, those few site managers who are part of the problem rather than the solution are in a position to do irreparable damage to the workers and reputations of their organizations.



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