

Who Owns Safety?

It is human nature to take better care of that which we own. So should we create ownership in our safety efforts?



Effective leaders divide their safety challenges into bite-sized pieces and address them through a team effort where coaches and players have a safety game plan and work together to win the war on accidental workplace injuries.

A large part of the former USSR's population was comprised of peasant farmers. Yet, when the government seized ownership of all farmland and assigned some of these farmers to raise crops, the country almost starved. The government made a concession to its own ideology and gave many families a plot of land on which they could raise food for themselves, tax exempt. In the early years, these plots, which were a small fraction of the arable soil, produced 90 percent of the nation's food. They still produce a significant portion.

This is just one of many stories that illustrate the power of a principle called "ownership." Ownership is the reason people will detail their own car but won't run a rental car through a free car wash. Ownership also is the reason why some safety efforts are stellar and others are lackluster. It is human nature to take better care of that which we own. So should we create ownership in our safety efforts? Who should own what, and how do we accomplish this?

First, safety is a big venture, too big for any one person. So each person or group of people should have their own family garden of safety. Safety leadership should belong to leaders. Safety expertise and compliance should belong to safety specialists. The rest should be decided carefully and thoughtfully. The division of ownership should acknowledge the unique nature of the organization and not simply copy what another has done.

Defining Teams, Establishing Ownership

Many manufacturing organizations, for example, divide the workforce into teams by job function. Each production line could be a team. Maintenance, logistics and office could be their own teams. In service organizations, they often divide by service offering or customer base. Military and research organizations often have structures that can be utilized to define safety ownership.

Once the teams are defined, the ownership should be decided. Each team should own two groups of safety responsibilities: compliance and improvement. The team must know the rules and should do whatever is necessary to make sure each member has the basic knowledge of safety compliance and exactly how it relates to their specific job.

The second responsibility should be a defined target for improvement in safety performance. These

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targets should go above and beyond compliance into discretionary behaviors that impact safety. Team leaders, in conjunction with organizational leaders and safety professionals, should determine these improvement targets based on prior safety data.

Often, the best way to determine improvement targets is by conducting a Pareto analysis of past accident and/or near-miss data to determine actions within the power of workers that potentially could improve safety performance. These actions may differ by job function or other variables. There may be improvement targets that could impact safety site-wide or each team may need to focus on different ones.

It is critical workers know the rationale for focusing on these improvement targets to help them develop a sense of buy-in. Many organizations either share the Pareto findings or involve members of each team in performing the analysis to begin building a sense of ownership. As W. Edwards Deming reminds us, "People support what they help create."

Performance Coaching

Once teams are formed and responsibilities for both compliance and improvement are identified, the organizational leaders from the top to the first-line supervisors must reinforce the sense of responsibility and ownership. This is accomplished through performance coaching.

Organizations that already empower employees can adopt this coaching model quickly and easily. Organizations steeped in command-and-control

management styles will have a more difficult and longer task to adopt these methods. However, organizations that have made this transition in management style, from cops to coaches, have reaped huge benefits from doing so.

Coaching is the process by which one person helps another perform better. Almost every organization's leaders desire to have better safety performance, but their management style is not necessarily designed to promote improvement at the individual level. The adoption of a coaching management style can change that. Coaching can create and reinforce individual ownership for safety in each person. If that ownership includes both compliance and improvement, the organization masters the basics and the ability to continuously improve.

Coaching is a simple, three-part process: focus, feedback and facilitate. Coaches focus workers on their personal responsibilities for safety and reinforce the individual ownership of these compliance and improvement targets. Coaches then give feedback to workers as they either succeed or fail to do the

things necessary to master their responsibilities. If workers fail, coaches ask why and determine what influences performance in the workplace. If coaches discover obstacles or barriers to good safety performance, they address these issues to make it easier to be safe.

The coaching model of supervision and management addresses the most common issues that impact workplace performance. Expectations are crystal clear with the personal focus. Motivation is accomplished through ownership and buy-in. Daily direction comes in the form of supportive feedback to reinforce good performance and correct problems. Any organizational issues that adversely impact the desired performance are identified and addressed to facilitate the process. Once initial improvement targets are accomplished, teams can celebrate success and move on to other potential improvements. Safety improvement becomes a daily routine instead of an organizational dream.

Organizations often pursue change and improvement through programs or design or simply through directives. These seldom produce the desired results and, even when

they do, the results seldom are sustainable.

True improvement in safety performance comes one worker at a time and one improvement at a time. Even those who know the old adage still try to eat the elephant in one bite and they choke on their own efforts. Effective leaders divide their safety challenges into bite-sized pieces and address them through a team effort where coaches and players have a safety game plan and work together to win the war on accidental workplace injuries. When everyone owns a piece of safety, change happens. **EHS**

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