



SAFETY

The Other Side of Owning Safety

Leaders need to step up and take ownership of the outcomes of the systems and processes they create.

Terry L. Mathis | Feb 28, 2018

My article from a year ago entitled, “Who Owns Safety?” (EHS Today, December 2016) focused on getting workers to feel a sense of ownership and leaders coaching them toward that goal. The other side of this issue involves the leaders themselves and what they should own. It is crucial for leaders to step up during both successes

and failures and take ownership of the outcomes of the systems and processes they create.

When leaders fix the blame, they often do not fix the problem. Even when workers cause accidents by not following administrative controls, there is always a reason for their actions. Leaders should seek out those reasons and understand what they can do differently to improve safety.

Leaders can learn most of what they need to know about improving safety by simply listening to the people who do the work.

As the CEO of Alcoa, Paul H. O'Neil encountered significant resistance from the board of directors for choosing to prioritize worker safety. He reportedly pointed to a picture of a worker who had been killed on the job and told his staff that they (including himself) had killed this man. He pointed out that they were the ones who made the decisions about how to direct the work and those decisions did not keep this man safe. This kind of ownership of safety results at the top led Alcoa to become world-class in their safety performance which, in turn, led them to increase their market value from \$3 billion in 1986 to over \$27.5 billion in 2000.

It was not just emphasis on safety that led to these results. The leaders of Alcoa turned that emphasis into actions that led them and their workers to achieve safety successes. As the leaders took ownership, it inspired the workers to do likewise. The leaders provided strategy, resources and information, and listened to their workers before making significant changes. All of these are things leaders can learn from and apply to their organizations. Let's look at each one in more detail.

Strategy

The coach needs to have a game plan. In safety, the organizational leader, in conjunction with the safety manager or senior member, should devise a specific and overarching strategy for safety. A strategy is much more than a set of programs aimed at reducing accidents. A strategy is a plan to win. It should direct and shape

all other actions and decisions. All programs and efforts should fit into its framework and work synergistically toward the strategic objectives.

Few companies have such a strategy and even some which do don't communicate it effectively to the whole workforce. A strategy needs to be sound, but it also needs to be known and executed against. Leaders who realize their responsibility to own safety recognize the necessity of such a strategy to unite efforts and empower the ownership of safety at the worker level.

Resources

Everyone in the organization needs certain resources to enable them to make a meaningful contribution to safety efforts. Leaders who realize this don't run out and buy what they think others need. Instead, they ask others what they need and what they prefer, and provide as close to that as possible.

In many organizations, managers and engineers constantly make changes to the workplace or buy new tools and/or equipment that does not really meet the needs of those who work there and use those items. Just as companies perform market research to check the viability of new products and services, leaders should research the needs of others before rushing to solutions that create more problems than they solve. It is hard to own safety when you have no say in your own safety equipment and workplace design.

Information

Knowledge is a critical part of ownership. Leaders who realize this provide more-than-adequate information about safety to the entire organization. All hands should know the safety strategy, have shared definitions of terms such as "safety" and "accident" as well as ongoing information about current efforts and results. All accident data should be shared and presented in a way that creates focus on the most important safety precautions and most common types of accidents that are occurring.

If workers don't have sufficient information, they tend to feel lost. When they feel lost, they tend to backtrack and undo change efforts. Such tendencies can undo safety-improvement initiatives. Information should form a roadmap that lets workers know exactly where the organization is going and if it is on- or off-course. Only when they are clear on the direction can they aid in getting there. Leaders who own safety realize the necessity of information in enabling others to own safety as well.

Listening

Most of what leaders need to know about improving safety can begin by simply listening to the people who do the work. Certainly the workers don't know everything they need, and don't know what they don't know, but they almost always know more than the leaders about daily operations. Even leaders with wonderful and creative solutions need accurate definitions of the problems to be solved.

One of the primary reasons consultants are needed is leaders not listening to their own people. Leaders who truly own safety know they need the knowledge and experience of their workforce as well as their ownership if everyone is to work together synergistically.

It is critical that workers take an ownership role in safety. Simply being in compliance is not adequate for excellent safety performance. Ownership elicits discretionary effort above and beyond minimum requirements. Workers who own safety take excellent care of their safety programs and ensure they produce excellent results.

The other side of this formula is the ownership leaders should take in safety. Leaders who simply try to control workers and blame them when accidents happen are not taking ownership. It is the leaders who design the workplace, procedures, rules, prescribed PPE, and set the priority of safety in relation to other organizational priorities. When accidents happen, their design and leadership is as much involved as worker behavior. Leaders who own safety already know this.

Terry Mathis, founder and CEO of ProAct Safety , has served as a consultant and advisor for top organizations the world over. A respected strategist and thought leader in the industry, Mathis has authored five books, numerous articles and blogs. EHS Today named him one of the “50 People Who Most Influenced EHS” four consecutive times. Mathis can be reached at info@proactsafety.com or 800-395-1347.

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