



## Applying the Three A's of Employee Engagement

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Getting workers engaged in safety efforts requires leaders to go beyond a compliance mindset and workers to move from "do as you're told" to "help us create safety excellence."

My recent article in IndustryWeek outlined three strategies for achieving employee engagement. These strategies are especially applicable to safety.

For some organizations, the best place to start engaging employees is in safety. Safety answers the "what's in it for me" question better than almost any other organizational endeavor. Once employees get engaged in safety, their efforts also can be directed toward other organizational goals.

For other organizations, safety engagement is the next logical step in safety-performance progression. Once the basics of safety compliance largely are accomplished, engagement becomes the next frontier. Safety excellence requires much more from workers than following rules and doing as they are told.

**The three strategies for engagement are:**

- Affinity (believing in the effort).
- Affiliation (participating in the effort).
- Autonomy (helping to create the effort).

The IndustryWeek article discusses ways to use any or all of these strategies to create engagement. Below are additional ideas for how to apply these strategies to employee engagement in safety.

### Affinity

The need to believe in something is basic human nature. Many workers don't believe that their organization is serious about achieving safety excellence. If safety is communicated as important until a customer needs an order in a hurry, workers realize that safety truly isn't a high priority, and they're demotivated.

If the emphasis in safety efforts is on mindless compliance, overkill rules or placing blame rather than on true excellence, then workers go through the motions but don't really buy in.

The sense that the organization needs better engagement usually comes from the realization that workers are less than enthusiastic about safety efforts. Enthusiasm comes from believing, not from being compelled.

Some workers simply don't believe that goals such as "zero accidents" are realistic or achievable. Their past experience may have taught them that even caring and careful workers can get injured. Exposing them to new methods to improve safety and showing them real-life examples of sites that actually have achieved their goals can begin to change the mindset that accidents are inevitable.

For workers to be truly engaged in safety, the goal of safety excellence must be believable. The idea of mission impossible makes for good theater, but not for effective engagement efforts.

One of the most effective ways to create affinity for safety programs is to humanize them. Many organizations have diminished their emphasis on the numbers and have placed the focus on the individuals. They put a face on accident reports and tell the stories of how accidents impact people and their families. They emphasize that increased effort or effectiveness is needed because of human need and not organizational greed.

In short, they put the caring back into safety.

Pursuing safety excellence for altruistic, humanistic reasons goes a long way toward converting the employees who have reluctant hearts and minds.

### **Affiliation**

Safety is not just an activity to participate in; it's something to belong to.

Organizations that do not offer affiliation at work drive employees to find it elsewhere. Many workers would pour their energy into improvement efforts if allowed and facilitated to do so. Without the opportunity to participate, however, they channel their energies into church, community or charity.



The need for affiliation is strong, and people will find something to give them a sense of belonging. Improvement efforts can provide a sense of affiliation, but most don't.

Strategies to create affiliation need both the right structure and the right marketing. The structure needs to facilitate participation, and the marketing needs to create the belonging.

Safety committees, teams, problem-solving groups, observations, audits, etc., offer workers activities to get them involved in safety. However, if these groups or activities don't offer meaningful involvement, they often create disengagement.

Many teams or committees are led by management, and workers are involved only in a token sense. Many observation and auditing programs recruit caring people and then define their participation in terms of confronting rather than helping their fellow workers. It is not enough to offer participation; it must be meaningful participation.

Participation also must be facilitated. That could mean holding meetings during shifts rather than during off days or holdover times, or providing adequate meeting rooms, materials and other resources.

Even meaningful participation falls short if the marketing isn't right. The participation needs a team flare (name and logo, or something with uniform qualities such as caps, shirts, hardhat stickers, etc.). The activities need to be known to everyone, and the successes need to be recognized and celebrated. Membership should be special and valued.

Some organizations have successfully turned their entire population into a safety team with meaningful participation. Others have smaller teams with rotating involvement opportunities that affect the general population in meaningful ways. Where they differ in structure, they match in marketing.

Most organizations assume that everyone buys into safety and there is no need to really sell them on it. However, organizations that create true affiliation in specific safety programs almost all market heavily and effectively. Getting buy-in and belonging requires marketing, and many safety efforts neglect this basic need.

## Autonomy

Autonomy is not complete freedom to do whatever you choose; it is defined decision rights.

Deming said: "People support what they help create." Providing participation opportunities for workers gives them a feeling of belonging. Allowing them to help create those opportunities for participation gives them pride, ownership and a deep sense of fulfillment that motivates their creativity.

Sometimes this can be accomplished by simply letting a team or committee design itself. This can take place within the limits of a strategic framework and even can be reduced to a series of pre-defined choices. Making something from a kit can create a similar sense of ownership that building from scratch creates. It also can make a better finished product.

Successfully using an autonomy strategy for engagement is difficult for many organizations. It requires trust and well-planned structure. Many leaders are not willing to delegate meaningful decision rights, and workers sense that their own involvement is only symbolic.

A common strategy around this dilemma is to make joint decisions in which workers can offer creative suggestions and leaders can make the final decisions.

Another common approach is to direct workers' creative input to the already existing programs in which workers participate. These efforts have strategic direction, but many decisions are needed to discover how to best accomplish their goals. Making such decisions can engage the creative energy of workers in constructive and meaningful ways.

Getting workers engaged in safety efforts means getting them to believe, participate and/or creatively contribute. It requires leaders to go beyond a compliance mindset and workers to move from "do as you are told" to "help us create safety excellence."

Organizations with strong employee engagement outperform others – significantly – in almost all areas of performance. Focusing on safety engagement could be the beginning of better performance in other areas as well.

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