

3 strategies for supervisor safety coaching

By Shawn M. Galloway

Supervisors influence worker behaviour more than any other level in an organization. However, most supervisors have not received formal training to coach for performance, much less to coach for safety performance. What often results is the belief that a supervisor's role is to manage safety compliance (i.e., rules, policies, procedures, personal protective equipment). This restricted thinking limits a leader in his or her ability to increase performance output beyond the minimum. In this situation, creation of a culture of safety excellence becomes a near impossibility.



Compliance is, without question, the critical foundation of a safety program. However, it is also the minimal level of safety effort expected of a company. Reaching the bare minimum can be managed and become common practice. This lowest level of exertion can then become a culturally reinforced expectation where an employee might go against the group when given the chance.

If extra effort is perceived as a bad idea by one's peers, valid or not, a company persists in a state of compliance-driven focus. Demonstrating the limited nature of safety compliance in total injury prevention is quite easy. Ask workers if they can obey all the rules, follow all the procedures, and wear all the appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) and still be injured. The answers provided will certainly be 'yes'. There are further hidden opportunities to improve safety and prevent injuries. The challenge is facilitating an employee's ability to recognize these opportunities and develop new habits that contribute to the creation of a new safety culture. This is where coaching comes in.

Coaching becomes an increasingly critical tool of management when attempting to achieve excellence in any performance category. This tool can be used to facilitate performance improvement in employees greater than they thought possible. It is best used to influence individuals to increase their performance output, and learn how to do so without outside direction. Coaching targets the creation of new behavioural habits. Consider the following three strategies.

1. A memorable, behaviourally-defined focus

When training supervisors and other leaders to become safety coaches, strategies and examples must be relevant, practical, clearly defined and easy to understand. Moreover, ensure the coaching targets are

- defined in terms of desired behaviour
- limited in scope
- focused on the highest leveragable incident prevention precautions

This can be determined from a Pareto

"When the leaders don't lead, the followers don't follow."

This is a critical truth in safety. Organizational leaders communicate priorities, values, and strategies to the workforce, both directly and indirectly. Specifically, managers and supervisors play a vital role in the safety efforts of most organizations, whether they realize it or not. Their impact on safety can be exceptional, if their behaviours are precisely aligned with organizational goals and develop effective communication and coaching skills.

When leaders at any level take active control of the messages they send to promote safety, a clear distinction can be made that safety is an organizational value, rather than a changing priority. They can set levels of expectation that point everyone in the direction of safety excellence and exert a positive influence on the formation of a safety culture. Safety values are

analysis of injury or incident data, identifying the vital few precautions that can help a majority of injuries and incidents.

According to research, our working memory (the executive information processing function of the brain) can handle only a limited amount of new information. This means people can remember only a few details. While repetition helps preserve this information in our long-term memory, relying on reminders is not the goal within coaching. Rather, it is to help people identify more effective strategies that they can internalize and thus sustain. To ensure the creation of these new, unprompted, desirable safety behaviours, the employees must be able to recite from memory the items they are being coached on. Try keep these items to fewer than seven.

established in an organization only when they are reinforced from multiple levels, at or near the point of decision. One great leader cannot accomplish this alone; it takes the efforts of many.

2. Forward facing commentary

If these targets are behaviourally defined, they are observable and feedback can be provided to the individual being coached. Even though someone has been told about the precautions, he or she will often forget and fall back into old habits. Coaches need to constantly remind workers through on-the-job feedback. If workers are observed taking the precautions, encourage them to continue. If they are not, thoughtfully remind and refocus.

The purpose of feedback is to create desirable future behaviours. Far too often, feedback is used as a mechanism to discuss past performance. The comedian, Lily Tomlin, once joked, "Forgiveness means giving up all hope for a better past." Authors Marshall Goldsmith and Jon Katzenbach coined the term "feedforward" to encourage leaders to spend more time creating a desirable future rather than rehashing a past that cannot be changed.

3. Remove the barriers to sustainable performance

Most workers share a common desire. They do not want to be injured. Ideally, work is performed in a way that accomplishes this. The reality is that, occasionally, a worker will encounter an obstacle or barrier that makes it difficult or impossible to accomplish the task as safely as possible. It is the role of a coaching supervisor to help identify and remove the obstacles to working safely.

To facilitate safety means to make it easy or, at best, less difficult to be safe. Supervisors have several opportunities to facilitate safety:

- the words they use (encouraging safe precautions, talking positively about safety)
- the behaviours they model (leading by example, making safety the way they do their work)
- visible proactive action (removing or eliminating barriers to safe work)

Proactive safety is best defined as "aggressively working to remove or reduce risk and safety barriers, thus making it easier and more logical for workers to perform safely." After all, if a worker cannot take a precaution that would have previously prevented an incident, isn't this a good example of a safety barrier? Unfortunately, supervisors typically recognize this obstruction during a postmortem of the event. This is too late.

Conclusion

Some organizations believe that if workers would exercise their ability to stop the job for safety, all incidents would be avoided. Unfortunately, this is rarely the reality of total incident preventability. Sometimes workers are

not aware of opportunities for performance improvement (i.e., precautions that can minimize exposure to risk); and sometimes they are not taking these precautions because other factors interfere or block their ability to perform the job as safely as possible. Both challenges can be directly impacted through coaching for safety.

Motivational speaker Bob Nelson once said, "You get the best effort from others not by lighting a fire beneath them, but by building a fire within." When safety coaching is implemented effectively, a culture is created based on positive, helpful, and appreciated forward-facing feedback. This creates an environment that intrinsically motivates people to act. Tapping into the vital discretionary effort within most employees is the most effective way for an organization to achieve a positive and sustainable safety culture.

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