Employee involvement in safety: Identifying participation barriers

Those striving to achieve safety excellence come to realize the importance of employee ownership and involvement in safety. It would be difficult to find a worker who purposely attempts to hurt himself. Everyone wants to be involved in safety to the point that it ensures they go home injury-free. Contrasting other work-related activities, safety presents its own internal motivation, incentive and reward.

People are willing to be involved in safety efforts, but it may be difficult to realize the demotivators that employees face. Demotivation is often described as something that either neutralizes previously held motivation or worse, creates a disincentive to being motivated. To be successful in ensuring engagement in safety, it is important to understand the social dynamics of involvement and the barriers to a participative safety culture.

Human beings are, by nature, social creatures. We desire to feel a sense of belonging. We want to be involved in something. We aspire to share our thoughts, creative or otherwise. We wish for participation in the communal relationships that the world around us perpetually promotes. If appropriately guided, this social desire could be positively leveraged to assist organizations in their safety efforts, toward the prevention of incidents.

The desire to be “connected” increases with each new social networking platform or technological advancement, especially for younger generations. Today, the prevailing sites — Facebook, Twitter and YouTube — offer great persuasion as they become more and more pervasive. These platforms allow for people to share their ideas, thoughts and curiosities. People are neurologically wired and culturally reinforced to share ideas. How can this be utilized in safety? Make no mistake; if you do not involve employees at work, they will look for other conduits to channel their creative tendencies. What safety involvement opportunities or conduits do you provide? Regrettably, employees are not always aware of the participation opportunities most companies offer.

To identify participation barriers, whether through perception surveys or focus group conversations, attempt to gather insight around the following two areas:

1. Can they identify the opportunities for involvement in safety? Ask employees to identify who they should contact to express an interest in volunteering. Occasionally, the reason you don’t have the desirable level of involvement is that employees do not know who to approach with their interest. This may seem overly simplistic, but remember that just because we might have shared information on this subject once, doesn’t mean the message was received.

2. Do they feel their immediate supervisor or manager would support them if they joined a safety team or committee? It has been repeatedly proven that people pay attention to what their boss pays attention to. If employees do not feel that their immediate supervisor holds a high degree of importance for safety volunteers, it is likely that an employee might be intrinsically discouraged to participate. How often do your supervisors speak about the importance of employee involvement in safety? Do they feel there would be direct or indirect punishment for participating? Would their bosses be inconvenienced if they were involved in safety efforts?

Experience has taught me that the approach is unexpectedly simple. Don’t jump too quickly to dashing proverbial participation carrots. Incentivizing is a short-lived tactic fraught with complications. Rather, work aggressively to identify and neutralize the participation demotivators. Following this you will have created a work environment that facilitates motivation and the desirable involvement behavior, rather than a culture that works against it. Only then can you ensure sustainability of the ideal safety goal: true ownership of safety, both on and off the job.

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