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Heard It Through the Grapevine

Anecdotal stories can bolster your safety culture and demonstrate that management truly cares about safe practices.

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Written by [Shawn Galloway](#)

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Understanding the Influence on Perception

Recently, I was assessing the culture of a company. The organization is considered one of the best in their industry in safety, yet they still had a few accidents from time to time. While they were proud of their status, they did not want to rest until they had reached and sustained zero accidents. As part of the assessment, we reviewed their safety management system and history of initiatives. We also administered a customized perception survey and conducted many individual and focus group interviews with people from all levels and shifts of the location. Of the different elements, I was interested to find out what had led to the positive perception among the employees about the support for safety by upper-level managers.

When I questioned many of the managers and supervisors about their roles, responsibilities and expectations for safety, the responses were not ideal. Rather than describing their actions, behaviors and examples they use to demonstrate behavioral integrity, I instead received comments like, "Well, I keep my people from getting injured, make sure they work safe, make sure they report incidents, and address unsafe actions."

Interestingly, I had a different experience when discussing this with groups of employees. The vast majority of the 80 workers (more than four shifts) I spoke to could share with me, almost verbatim, one of three stories that had recently occurred that reinforced the perception that "management really does care about our safety." I had the opportunity to meet the star of one such story.

Harry's Story

Harry (an experienced hourly employee) was working at his station operating a piece of machinery. Just as he was shutting the machine down to prepare for a shift change meeting, he noticed two visitors walking toward his area. They were being escorted by an engineer who was relatively new to the site. He noticed the only individual wearing the required eye protection was the engineer.

Harry walked up to the group, introduced himself and welcomed them to his area. He informed the visitors about the importance of safety at the site and expressed concern about the lack of proper personal protective equipment (PPE). Harry let the visitors know that he was concerned for everyone's safety, including visitors to the site. He expressed the importance of eye protection and that it was a requirement in this part of the location. He then asked the visitors if he could show them where the eye protection was stored. After the visitors donned the PPE, he thanked them for their time and wished them a safe visit.

What Harry did not know is that Angela, the Assistant Site Manager, was helping a nearby supervisor and had witnessed most of the conversation. Once the group had departed, Angela approached Harry and asked if he had a moment. She then proceeded to shake Harry's hand and thank him for taking the time to look out for the visitors' safety. She expressed that safety was an important part of her personal values and, moreover, the values for the site. She stated that it meant a lot to her, personally, that Harry took the time to ensure others were safe.

Reinforcing Values

The leaders of this organization were shining examples of those who truly cared for the safety of the employees at their location. However, when I posed the question, "What do you believe is creating the positive perception around support for safety?" the group consensus was that it had to do with the number of times safety is mentioned in meetings and the plethora of posters throughout the site. Communication in safety is critical. You often set the priority for something based on how many times you talk about it. If you mention safety once for every 100 times you talk about production, the perception that production is more important than safety is frequently assumed.

When I shared these stories to the leaders during my closing discussion, the managers who were involved in the stories had, for the most part, forgotten about the events. Furthermore, all were unaware of the impact they had on the hourly portion of the culture. The leaders of this site repeatedly communicated their support for safety; what created the value of safety was the cultural reinforcement.

Employees mentioned that when someone expressed the feelings of pressure to take a safety short cut, a fellow employee would provide a story describing a time where a leader showed his or her support for taking the time to follow safe practices. This often comforted the employee and influenced the decision to carry out safe production.

For values to be integrated into the fabric of a culture, they have to be enforced and reinforced at or near the point of decision. Conversations about facts and figures don't necessarily ensure safety values, but stories can be told that will influence decisions on a daily basis. These stories are often the centerpiece of cultures, and your culture is your best reinforcer of values.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "What you do speaks so loud that I cannot hear what you say." What are you doing, specifically, to positively demonstrate behavioral integrity and reinforce the values of and support for safety? Are people telling your stories, and are they ones your mother would be proud of?

About the Author: *Shawn M. Galloway is the President of ProAct Safety and host of the weekly podcast series, Safety Culture Excellence. He is a veteran of hundreds of international customized advanced safety-improvement initiatives. He has spoken at numerous company and industry conferences. Shawn can be reached at 800-395-1347 or info@proactsafety.com.*