

Ownership in safety: The challenge of increasing headcount

Written by Shawn M. Galloway
Tuesday, 04 January 2011 15:39



As organizations increase in size, it can become progressively more difficult for safety to “operate like a well-oiled machine and get everyone on board.” As a company or site grows, so does the amount of influencers. The challenge is to ensure that positive influencers increase while, correspondingly, negative ones decrease.

During this time, the importance of strongly-held values continuously reinforced at all levels throughout the culture becomes ever more critical. If you have yet to achieve the desired state of safety culture excellence, now is the time.

Safety culture, ownership and values do not increase in importance and criticality exclusively for larger organizations. Sites with total headcount of 25 people also struggle with this issue, similar to companies with thousands of employees. Experience teaches us that we all have analogous challenges in culture and safety performance, yet no two sites are alike. Every group is different due to cultural uniqueness: varying leadership and followership styles and diverse histories of change/program success.

Guideline — Beware of the “magic formula”

Traveling most weeks out of the year, often with early and late flights, it can be tricky to get the exercise needed to stay in shape. As a result, exercise that comes in a pill is a perpetual search. Yet, I cannot delude myself. Even with great advancements in science, there is no such thing. I must work to stay healthy. Similarly in safety, excellence does not come in a box, nor is there a proverbial silver bullet. Reaching excellence in safety, and maintaining it, requires constant, unwavering dedication from all levels.

Exceptional programs can be procured to help accomplish important objectives such as raising awareness about certain elements. All predefined programs or methodologies can offer assistance, but this assistance is best used as another tool in your developing safety toolbox, rather than a panacea. As your culture continues to change or grow, so must the approaches to safety excellence. If any approach becomes an awkward fit to your site, it will not be sustainable, even ones that provide early success. What gets us to good performance will often not further us to great performance.

Guideline – Ensure positive consequences for involvement

Programs-of-the-Month continue to plague us due to the lack of input from those affected by the change. The more programs and initiatives that come and go, the more undesirable it is to get involved. If you want people to have ownership for their vital role in safety, ask yourself this: “What positive consequences are there for current involvement?” (i.e., teams, committees, turning in safety suggestions and work orders, leading a toolbox talk, stopping the job for safety, expressing concern to a peer, etc.)

Ownership in safety: The challenge of increasing headcount

Written by Shawn M. Galloway
Tuesday, 04 January 2011 15:39

If there is no sense of appreciation for discretionary effort, it is human nature to work towards the path of least resistance, doing just what is necessary to get by. If there is nothing stimulating internal motivation, it is hard to expect people to provide extra effort when there are so many conflicting priorities. This point is not to propose incentives or rewards, rather to create an environment that facilitates the development of internal motivation.

Guideline – If leaders don't lead, followers don't follow

People pay attention to what their boss pays attention to. Getting safety to “operate like a well-oiled machine” requires cultural peer-reinforcement within all levels as the site population increases. If the only influencer is the person responsible for safety, the impact will be limited, even more so as the site size increases. To create the desired ownership in safety, a growing shared belief in the industry is that safety professionals operate best as advisors, internal consultants, facilitators and coaches; not the process owner.

Creating a culture of safety excellence has to start with leadership, holding (in a downward cascading manner) the subordinate leaders accountable for leading safety. It becomes increasingly critical for leaders to create behaviourally-defined roles, responsibilities and expectations (RREs). If these RREs are behaviourally-defined, they are observable, and thus coachable from any leader to their direct report. This starts to send the message that safety is important to all leaders because it is behaviourally visible to all employees.

Guideline — Culture change happens best from within

One of the most effective strategies for ownership in any change is creative input. Creative input is, by nature, a motivational tool. Moreover, it helps to create the aforementioned environment in which people feel intrinsically motivated to participate in something worthwhile and important to their peers and direct supervisor.

When internal change agents are leveraged to help in the design and implementation of the improvement strategies, this becomes their change, not yours. If success equals sustainability rather than short-term gains, respectfully, ego has no place in safety culture change. This is exemplified in the management adage, “Lead by not leading.”

Conclusion

It is human nature to push back when pressure is applied. While pressure can be a viable tool when immediate movement or direction is needed, it is the wrong tool for achieving a culture of safety excellence. Creating a desirable culture is more about influential motivation than pressure.

To achieve ownership, ensure the methods of change and tactics are customized to fit the existing safety management system and culture. To gain involvement, ensure people feel appreciated for participating. To create leaders that demonstrate support for safety, ensure behavioural integrity: what they do matches what they say. To maintain a sustainable safety excellence in both performance and culture, it is important to remember that while change can be influenced from above, it happens best and is most frequently reinforced, from within.

These guidelines will help you to establish the enviable safety attitude of, “we want to,” rather

Ownership in safety: The challenge of increasing headcount

Written by Shawn M. Galloway
Tuesday, 04 January 2011 15:39

than, “we have to.” This is the simple difference between achieving safety excellence and doing what is necessary to get by.

Shawn M. Galloway is the president of ProAct Safety, an international safety excellence consulting firm. As an author, speaker and expert business-safety strategist, he has assisted hundreds of organizations to achieve and sustain excellence in safety, culture and operational performance. Shawn is the host of the COS video series, [Culture Shock](#), and the weekly podcast series, [Safety Culture Excellence](#).

He can be reached at 936-273-8700 or

info@ProActSafety.com

This e-mail address is being protected from spambots. You need JavaScript enabled to view it