

Preparing Workers for Safety Improvement

By: Terry L. Mathis

We were recently asked to visit a site and determine why a new safety initiative was not gaining traction. When we asked workers on the shop floor about the new program, some knew nothing about it and none of them knew all the details. A common reason for failure of safety improvements is inadequate preparation of workers to understand and support the new effort. Communication is a powerful tool that can greatly enhance your new program's chances for success.

Many organizations have discovered that better communication with the workforce will improve safety, independently of new programs and processes. The more workers know and the more they are aligned in their personal and group safety efforts, the better everything works. When a new safety program is being initiated, the need to communicate is even more important. So, what are some safety basics to communicate to workers and what program-specifics do they need to know if you are beginning something new?

SAFETY BASICS

If your organization has a safety vision and/or mission statement, is it simply posted on the wall? Or is it adequately shared and communicated to workers? Many organizations lack a basic, shared "Definition of Safety." They talk about safety as if everyone automatically knows what it is and how it works. In fact, most workers have vastly differing ideas about safety and especially about how to reduce or prevent accidents. We once polled 100 workers within the same organization and asked them what they perceived to be their greatest risk. All of the employees worked in the same area on the same machines doing very similar jobs. We received 84 different answers. We also asked the question, "What is safety?" and the most common answer was simply, "Not getting hurt." Even if all workers agree with this simple answer, it does not tell them HOW to not get hurt. The varying approaches to this common goal are all but common.

Developing a common definition of safety and communicating it until workers can almost recite it has some potential advantage. Aligning everyone around a common cause that is well-defined is powerful in most organizations. Having a common definition makes it easier to talk to each other about safety issues and overcomes many of the basic disagreements that hamper both communication and cooperation. Workers' effort becomes more aligned and efficient, and adjustments can be made more easily and completely when there are changes or new issues that arise. An aligned workforce forms a safety culture around the commonalities and norms, and addresses safety as an army of accident fighters rather than unaligned individuals.

The common definition of safety can now be expanded to include the definition of an accident, the basic ways to prevent accidents, and the organizational and individual activities to identify and manage risks. Workers not only align in basic goals, but in the strategies to achieve those goals. The whole organization works on safety as a team. The results of these simple alignments, and more regular communication, are usually significant. Meaningful metrics can also help to make the changes more visible and motivating.

PROGRAM/PROCESS INFORMATION

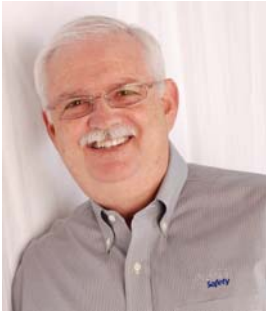
If the organization is starting a new safety-improvement initiative, consider beefing up the communication of the new program to the workforce even before kickoff. In doing so, remember that communication is a process and not an event. Sharing one-time information will not be enough. Regular progress reports will not only inform, but align and motivate as workers see the new initiative taking off and making a difference. Giving information needs to be balanced with answering workers' questions to make sure that the proper depth of understanding is reached and that no misconceptions are created. You will inevitably find that the amount of official communication is inversely proportional to the amount of unofficial communication. If the rumor mill goes into high gear as the new program begins, the amount of information is probably insufficient.

Make sure that all workers know the basics goals and details of the new initiative, such as:

- What is the rationale for the new program?
- What it will look like? Will it involve new training or changes in the workplace?
- Who will be directly involved? How and why were they selected and will there be opportunities for others to get involved in the future? If so, how does one volunteer?
- Will it change roles, responsibilities, and expectations of workers or direct supervisors and, if so, how?
- When will it start? How long will it last?
- What are realistic expectations for results? How will results be measured and are there any key process indicators to measure the effort itself?
- Will it require any new structures, such as committees, audits, or peer observations?
- Will there be any new terminology to describe the efforts or results?
- Will there be new metrics that impact or change existing metrics?
- How will everyone know about progress and/or conclusion of the new program?

Keeping the workforce informed about projects accomplishes several purposes: it shows respect for the workforce by keeping them in the know; it solicits their cooperation through creating a well-informed atmosphere for the project; it creates talking points that make it easy for workers to discuss the project among themselves; it removes the need for the rumor mill to carry project information; and it makes the project a team effort. All these create a greater probability for success of the project and foster a sense of teamwork that can be beneficial for future projects as well.

A well-informed workforce is a tool for safety excellence. Aligning workers with a definition and strategy for safety can reduce accidents as a stand-alone project. When new (and often expensive) projects are about to be launched, it becomes even more critical to make sure workers are informed and that their support is invited for the new initiative. Good communication is relatively inexpensive and can be a powerful tool for accomplishing the level of safety excellence that should be sought by caring and efficient organizations.



Terry L. Mathis is the founder and CEO of ProAct Safety. As an international expert and safety culture practitioner, he has worked with hundreds of organizations customizing innovative approaches to achieve and sustain Safety Culture Excellence. He is a regular presenter at numerous company and industry conferences, and was recently named one of the Top 50 Most Influential Leaders in EHS.

In 1993, ProAct Safety was created with the sole purpose of helping organizations achieve and sustain safety excellence. This focus has led the firm to become recognized as the world's most successful provider of Safety Excellence Strategies. As advisors to those who desire to be among the best in safety throughout the world, we recognize sustainable excellence is never a one size fits all approach. We firmly believe the only path to sustainable safety cultures and performance is a collaboratively defined one. We look forward to collaborating with you. Visit our website at www.ProActSafety.com, or we can be reached at 800.395.1347.