



Safety leadership happens in the middle

Why are our most important leaders, responsible for driving improvement in performance, culture and results, often our most inexperienced, undertrained, underdeveloped and incapable? Most of us have seen the situation when the super employee becomes the supervisor without ever being taught how to be an effective leader. Are your supervisors more managers of tasks or inspirers of performance and drivers of change?

Anyone who directly oversees the activities of the work force is often in the most influential position of leadership.

It is important to recognize two important aspects when focusing on the leadership role of a supervisor. First, understand it doesn't require a title to be a leader. Leaders are found at all levels, influencing others to do more than required to collect a paycheck. After all, leadership is largely

about influence. Second, of course senior leadership sets the tone, priorities and destination for change; however, the rubber meets the road between upper levels and the employee work force.

In my experience, the average tenure of a plant, refinery or location manager is about three to four years. I've also found the most stable population is the first-line supervisor. When their top leaders leave and new ones fill their place, usually bringing a new set of priorities and direction, supervisors will often take a "wait them out" approach. One of the most important steps a new leader takes is ensuring alignment in vision, priorities and values and that they have the right people in the right position with the right leadership capabilities.

Anyone who directly oversees the activities of the work force is often in the most influential position of leadership. How well are you enabling them to be the leaders you need to further drive improvement? Moreover, how long are they in their role before learning the difference between managing for compliance and coaching for and inspiring performance?

Every organization on the journey to recognize and sustain excellence in safety, or any important aspect of operational performance, needs to develop its front-line supervisors. If the individuals directly responsible for the performance of the work force do not have the skills, are not willing to improve their leadership styles or are not held accountable for the leader they need to be, how will you recognize improvement? Doing the same things over and over again while expecting different results is the definition of insanity. Yet, if we are not developing and holding supervisors, and even their immediate boss, accountable for being the leader they need to be, improvement is more a matter of luck than purposeful intent.

Consider answering these six questions as they have served me well when assessing leadership capabilities in client organizations:

1. What are your leadership onboarding practices?
2. What percent of your supervisors and managers would you put in the category of change agents, challengers of status quo and true leaders, and why?
3. What percent of your supervisors and managers would you put in the category of managers of results, maintaining the status quo, and why?
4. What role does safety play in both promotions and leadership development?
5. What are the defined safety roles, responsibilities and results for your leaders?
6. How do you proactively hold leaders accountable for their individual performance, and not just results?

Once you have answers to these questions, you have identified your starting point. Remember, developing leaders is a continuous process and does not result from a single training event. Additionally, if those the supervisors report to are not demonstrating leadership behaviors as well, the lack of reinforcement, or worse, the conflict in expectations, will undermine the success. While senior leaders are ultimately responsible for results, culture and direction, safety leadership is most visible in the middle and often the most overlooked influencer in safety.

For more information, contact Galloway at info@ProActSafety.com or call (936) 273-8715. ●

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