



Importance of the Supervisor in Your Safety Program

It has been said that it takes a community to raise a child. Likewise, more and more companies have begun to operate on the concept that it takes much more manpower than just the safety person alone to help a safety culture grow and remain strong. Although the models where the safety person functions as the “safety cop” when patrolling the site or the human resources director attempts to tackle a very broad set of regulatory requirements while already being stretched thin are still quite common, many companies are coming to the realization that the job is just too large for one person alone. And while gaining the support of management and enlisting the help of line workers in tackling safety issues are two areas where getting help is increasingly addressed, a third resource that should not be forgotten is the supervisor.

Whether or not the supervisor is on-board with the program will make or break it right out of the gate. According to a publication by Oregon OSHA, “the supervisor is the one person who can take immediate, direct action to make sure that his or her work area is safe and healthful for all employees.” It is the supervisor alone who is in the position to “control employees, machines, and working conditions on a daily, full-time basis.” It is for this reason that employers increasingly rely on the supervisor to help implement safety policies as spelled out by management.

The first key when relying on workplace supervisors to help with safety is making sure that they know what will be asked of them. Before they are ever put in the position to monitor their subordinates’ compliance, they need a higher level of training than other workers to ensure that they know what to search for while looking out for others. It is for this reason that many companies require that all supervisory personnel complete some additional hazard awareness training such as the OSHA 10 or 30-hour as a prerequisite for being put in the position in the first place.

Communication is a second critical element. The supervisor really is the main link between management and employees. For this reason, regular communication between both parties must take place to ensure a two-way exchange of information. Clearly, the safety manager will have much that he or she will want to talk about with the supervisor to make sure that they understand initiatives and are able to share pertinent information with their direct reports. However, the supervisor also should be relied upon to share a sense of how well the safety program is actually being implemented on the ground level. The safety manager will want to hear, for example, the supervisor’s thoughts on the level of safety compliance within a particular area. Additionally, the supervisor can give valuable insight into employee perspective on a particular safety rule or the adequacy of a form of protection in place, as well as, ideas for correcting problems that have been uncovered.

The supervisor is not just a passive participant in the safety process. He or she can and should be relied upon to add to the program itself. Not only can the supervisor be asked to provide regular training in daily “toolbox talks,” but help should be solicited from them in the creation of Job Safety Analyses to ensure that functional safe job procedures are established that rely upon their special knowledge of a work process as well as their previous safety experience in the area. Simply put, they should be asked to help define safety policy and, then, communicate it outward.



Finally, supervisors must be held accountable for safety within their area. If a safety inspection reveals noncompliance by a worker in a particular supervisor's area the first conversation should be with the offending employee and next, with the supervisor. As is the case with all workers, supervisors will make efforts to control what they know is important to their direct managers, which in this case would include the safety person and other company management. If they are not held accountable, safety will be an issue that they will address only when time permits or when they know that it is being monitored. If, on the other hand, they are consistently reminded about their role in the area, they will be much more likely to take the initiative.

Today safety managers have much more help at their disposal as companies increasingly comprehend the value of a solid safety program. A major resource that is relied upon more and more to help the company be successful in this area is the supervisor. This should be someone who is well versed in many of the same areas of safety compliance as the safety manager. Additionally, this person should be regularly included in direct talks with management regarding the direction of the program and held responsible for shortfalls in their area when and if they exist.

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