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Building a Safety Culture: Practical Steps for Better Safety Outcomes

Discover practical safety management techniques, including bite-sized training, peer observation, and system feedback.

by Mark Lamendola

Key Highlights

- Traditional enforcement methods often turn safety into a game of "catch me if you can," which is ineffective and counterproductive.
- Focusing on personal responsibility and methodical work practices leads to safer, higher quality outcomes and reduces enforcement issues.
- Implementing small, frequent training sessions enhances knowledge retention and safety awareness compared to infrequent, lengthy sessions.
- Regular observation of procedures like lockout/tagout and soliciting specific feedback from employees can identify and fix safety weaknesses effectively.

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If employees are not following the safety rules, OSHA fines the company. If employees are injured due to not following the safety rules, the financial liability is on the company (and its insurer). If a safety violation results in an operational loss or late performance penalty, that's on the company. The company has real motivation to see to it that employees follow the safety rules.

Yet many companies have a problem with safety rule compliance. One solution is to incentivize supervisors to catch people committing infractions. This solution depends on more resources being devoted to catching employees doing something wrong. It doesn't reward them for doing something right. For these and other reasons, it's a bad solution. One of those other reasons is it turns safety into a "catch me if you can" game played between management and employees. That's a losing game for all the participants.

For a long time, this game was the standard practice. But then other solutions produced superior results. For example, DuPont came out with their STOP program. This program makes employees responsible for each others' safety and empowers them with a simple tool. They stop someone who is performing an unsafe act. They ask them why it's unsafe and how they can do it safely. There's no disciplinary action involved, as the focus is on promoting safe choices rather than on punishing people. Of course, it assumes fairly innocent mistakes. It still allows for deliberately bad behavior to be subject to disciplinary action.

By the 1990s, companies in Europe had demonstrated success after changing from prescription (do these exact things) and proscription (do not do these exact things) to personal responsibility (identify and solve the safety problems you face). This did not go unnoticed among safety experts, and it became a frequent topic at NETA conferences. It made its way into NFPA 70E, essentially remodeling that standard around this philosophy.

If you're having enforcement issues, you can reduce them tenfold by leaning more heavily into this philosophy. Here are some practical steps:

- Stress the expectation that people will work methodically. Speak of good workmanship and good safety as being intertwined. Work that is done haphazardly is neither high quality nor safe. The only way to get either one is to work methodically. And when your methods are right, you accomplish both.
- Bake safety in. Baking safety into your methods (your training and procedures) is a massively effective thing management can do for safety. The heavy lifting has already been done for the baking process, it's called NFPA 70E. Articles 110, 120, and 130 are key.
- Make everyone responsible for safety, and not only for their own safety, but also for the safety of others. Create a system or program where employees can support each other in catching unsafe acts, and do so in a way that is respectful and helpful.
- Replace marathon-style training sessions with frequent "small bite" training meetings. Five to ten minutes focused on a single topic, done twice a week, will produce vastly superior results over the "drink from a fire hose" day of training done annually. The latter is mostly wasted time, due to the low absorption rate.
- Observe several lockout/tagout procedures being performed. A common mistake with the execution of these is failing to verify the absence of power. Another common mistake is failing to correctly verify the absence of power. In the first instance, there's no verification. In the second instance, the method isn't 100% reliable; it needs to be done with a voltmeter (DMM) and using the three-step method (test, verify against a known source, test again). Lockout/tagout embodies several safety principles at once, thus focusing on these can have a major effect on overall safety thinking.
- Pick a crew to observe, and watch them handle one or two phases of a job. Look for weaknesses in your procedures. Ask specific questions about those procedures, such as if they are clear enough or need to be revised. Get specific feedback and act upon it.
- Ask individuals what barriers to the safe execution of their work they have encountered. This is not a question that typically gets asked, so make it typical in your company. The feedback is likely to include problems you easily could have fixed if only you'd known about them. This technique also lays to rest the "management doesn't care" excuse for not reporting safety issues.

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Prior to starting his own business, Mark served as the Technical Editor on EC&M *for six years, worked three years in nuclear maintenance, six years as a contract project engineer/project manager, three years as a systems engineer, and three years in plant maintenance management.*

Mark earned an AAS degree from Rock Valley College, a BSEET from Columbia Pacific University, and an MBA from Lake Erie College. He's also completed several related certifications over the years and even was formerly licensed as a Master Electrician. He is a Senior Member of the IEEE and past Chairman of the Kansas City Chapters of both the IEEE and the IEEE Computer Society. Mark also served as the program director for, a board member of, and webmaster of, the Midwest Chapter of the 7x24 Exchange. He has also held memberships with the following organizations: NETA, NFPA, International Association of Webmasters, and Institute of Certified Professional Managers.