Being Seen and Heard: Leadership's Role in Driving a Best-in-Class Safety Program

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Successful safety programs often identify the need for leadership support through phrases such as, "safety needs to start at the top." The point being made is that leaders provide the influence for change to occur at lower levels.

Having support from senior leadership, including C-suite executives, in prioritizing and leading an organization's safety effort is paramount. Saying that safety is a priority is easy but making good on that promise can be challenging. We often see a commitment to worker safety on letterhead tag lines, hard hat stickers, jobsite banners, and even graphics on company vehicles. But many companies struggle with sustaining their commitment and windup compromising particularly when push comes to shove during pressed construction schedules and squeezed budgets.

understood. Conversely, where leadership is clearly involved in the safety effort the workforce internalizes its value because if it matters to the boss then it matters to me.

If It Matters to the Boss, Then it Matters to Me

Why do top leaders need to be seen and heard and be "out-in-front" when it comes to leading the safety charge? Because the health, well-being, and safety of the workforce impacts the organization on every level. For those organizations having true best-in-class safety programs, safety is woven into all operational areas and is identified as being equally important, if not more so, than quality, productivity and profitability. Without leadership being regularly engaged in messaging, safety's place in the organizations priorities is silently

The Value Proposition

The interconnectedness of worker injury and business success is no secret but one that is not completely appreciated due to the difficulty in calculating costs. Both human and business costs are at stake when it comes to safeguarding the workforce.

HUMAN COSTS INCLUDE:

» Disabling injuries and illnesses - loss of an eye, fingers, or hearing; lung disease; chronic back pain

- » Impact to lifestyle - limited ability to exercise, vacation, or wake up pain-free
- » Mental health issues - strained relationships, reduced self-worth, depression
- » Loss of livelihood - loss of ability to earn a living

BUSINESS IMPACTS INCLUDE:

- » Decreased workforce morale
- » Higher worker compensation insurance premiums
- » Interrupted work schedules
- » Reduced productivity and profitability
- » Citations from regulatory authorities like OSHA
- » Diminished industry reputation and negative publicity
- » Administrative costs to replace and train talent
- » Unable to qualify for client work due to poor safety performance metrics

The direct and indirect costs associated with workplace injuries add up to over $160 billion per year, according to the 2020 statistics provided by the National Safety Council. Unfortunately, these costs are underappreciated - until a company identifies a trend in injuries or a fatality occurs. When these costs become obvious, leadership can see that making safety (at least) equally as important as other priorities results in greater profitability and sustainability.

Together in the Same Direction

 A critical first step for leadership teams is to agree on what they want. Without leadership aligned on a purpose and direction, it's difficult to successfully execute the change that's needed. In other words, it's preferred that all the heads go up and down when asked the question whether a best-in-class safety program is desired. Most leaders agree immediately to sign-on when proposed with pursuing a best-in-class program - because it's always good to be the best at everything.

However, pumping the enthusiasm breaks a little, at least one leader invariably asks, "What will it take to be the best?" At this point an experienced safety professional, who has already completed a thorough program gap analysis, can describe the framework for change that the company will need to subscribe

to. That roadmap for change can be simple or complex, depending on many factors, but the first order of business is to explain what form of support is needed from the leadership team.

Leader Action Plans

Most often, it's not that leadership team members don't want to get involved in safety they just don't know how to. And in many cases, they don't understand the impact of their actions, both supportive and indifferent, when it comes to championing safety within their organization. The simple act of getting involved at any level demonstrates a commitment, a priority, and most of all a caring attitude.

So how do leaders "do" safety? An action plan is a great way to commit themselves to their effort and hold each other accountable. Establishing weekly, monthly, or quarterly activities by creating a personal action plan keeps leaders on-task.

A great resource for developing action plans is the Center for Construction Research and Training (formerly CPWR) Safety Climate Workbook. The workbook outlines eight key program areas and within each area it provides measurable action items that can be adopted to form a personal action plan.

THESE PROGRAM AREAS INCLUDE:

1. Demonstrating management commitment
2. Aligning and integrating safety as a value
3. Ensuring accountability at all levels
4. Improving site safety leadership
5. Empowering and involving workers
6. Improving communication
7. Training and continuing education
8. Encouraging owner/client involvement

Good things start to happen as leader-worker trust evolves through regular participation in safety activities. Think of how easier it becomes to roll-out a new safety initiative, policy, or procedure when the employees really believe that their employer has their best interests at heart.

It's certain that safety culture improves when the CEO visits a jobsite to recognize the Safety Champion of the Month in front of their peers.

Safety culture improves when the president sits in on monthly safety committee meetings and is an active participant by asking questions.

Safety culture improves when the CFO visits an office location and brings lunch to thank everyone for their dedication to safety and reminds them of the ways that injuries cost the company.

A sincere relatable message is all that it takes. For some leaders getting more closely involved in safety may be new and feel awkward. But don't worry about hitting it out of the park every time. It's the act of just being regularly seen and heard that matters most.

The actions by an organization's leadership - and inactions - set the tone and expectations for safety. The influence and impact of leaders being seen and heard supporting safety issues makes a significant contribution to drive safety and establish a desired safety culture. Leaders need to hold each other accountable for taking actionable steps to "walk the talk" and lead by example. Success can be found in creating a personal action plan for each leader that identifies measurable means of getting involved.

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