How to Build a Strong Safety Program

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Team member safety is on the minds of organization leaders each day. Successful companies know the importance of keeping their teams safe, no matter the type of work they do or the conditions in which they do them. A safe workplace is also critical to employee recruitment and retention, which are important in today's competitive employment environment. A workplace that is free from incidents and accidents is also a more productive workplace.

So, what can organizations do to protect their employees? Responsible analyses of safety incidents, along with careful tracking and measurement of safety indicators, are two critical parts of a strong safety program.

ROOT-CAUSE ANALYSIS

Each day we face challenges that stretch and pull us from many different directions. None of these are more difficult than when we receive a call informing us that one of our team members has had a serious incident or injury.

Once the incident is over and the team member is receiving the care required, the next vital step is performing a root-cause analysis (RCA) to determine what happened and to prevent it from happening again. Typically, an investigation team consisting of project management, superintendents, supervisors, and safety professionals review and secure the scene to collect information relevant to the incident.

As you begin an incident investigation and RCA, it is important to keep in mind that it must be done in a fear-free environment that focuses on the facts as they stand alone, and it must always avoid blame. The information collected must not gravitate around preconceived notions of employee error or misconduct.

COMMON CAUSES OF INCIDENTS

Most safety incidents occur due to one of three causal factors:

1. Human error — Simple distractions or lapses in judgment are one of the most identifiable causes of incidents. Determining that an error was made is the first part of an investigation, but it does not stop there. We must consider all the factors that allowed the person to make the decision, and work to mitigate those same mistakes from happening again in the future.

2. Safety systems — Incidents in these areas require a look at the physical safety systems, how employees are trained on the processes, and how safety systems are implemented and used throughout a company. Are the processes outdated? How was the employee tasked? Was the employee properly trained? What did the training consist of? Is there a training knowledge assessment?
3. Culture — Culture is the most difficult part to examine for most employers. It is driven from the top of the organization down, including everything from how processes and procedures are developed to how they are implemented, used, and verified. Culture is a critical factor in how employees make decisions, whether positive or negative, based on a perceived acceptable level of risk. At some organizations, project budgets and schedules drive decisions about acceptable levels of risk. Will we have employees working from ladders or lifts? Do we bring in logistics personnel to handle and stage material, or can we use the field teams (or, often, inexperienced apprentices)? Is there enough heavy equipment to warrant hiring a specialty contractor to move and set large electrical apparatus or generators? Should we bring in a specialty contractor for core hole drilling, or does that fall on our team members?

Steps two and three can be difficult, because they require that organization leaders take a hard look in the mirror. Keeping an open mind and being willing to look just as hard at your safety systems and culture as you do the actions of employees enables you to develop effective safety systems and cultivate a positive safety culture, which provides a defense against human error. Organizations with a genuine passion for protecting the health and safety of their employees and working to prevent future incidents can enable RCA success.

MEASURING SAFETY EFFORTS

Another critical factor in ensuring team members' safety is the ability to measure an organization's safety efforts. Like every other aspect of business, safety must be measured so that companies can determine their level of performance and whether they are heading in the right direction. A clear understanding of safety performance indicators can raise awareness among leadership and team members and help focus attention on areas where it is needed most.

LEADING AND LAGGING INDICATORS

Safety performance is generally tracked under two broad categories: leading indicators and lagging indicators. Lagging indicators measure the organization's past safety performance and include incident and accident statistics like Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) recordable injuries; injury frequency and severity; days away, restricted, and transferred (DART); and worker's compensation costs. Though these are commonly used safety measurements, the major drawback to solely using lagging indicators is that they only measure past occurrences or failures, causing companies to be reactive rather than proactive. They are a poor gauge of prevention and can create complacency. A company could look at a low incident and injury rate and think their safety programs are adequate, when in fact there might be numerous unexamined risk factors in the workplace that have the potential to lead to future injuries.

A more proactive safety approach examines leading indicators, which are centered on continuous improvement to ensure future safety performance. Leading indicators focus on the regular activities that employees are engaged in to prevent injuries and accidents. Root-cause analyses are examples of leading indicators; even though they take place after an incident has occurred, they focus on incident causation and prevention of future injuries. Other examples of leading indicators include conducting safety audits, attending safety trainings, tracking near-misses, and performing risk assessments of tasks, equipment, and machinery maintenance.

Though lagging indicators are important to track and include measurements that are required for reports, most companies that are striving for safety excellence use leading indicators to gauge safety performance and drive continuous improvement.

Ensuring a safe workplace is the duty of every organization. Those that embrace safety will help ensure organizational success by protecting their most vital asset: their team members. Comprehensive measurement of safety practices, along with root-cause analyses of incidents, are the architecture to a great safety program.

About the Author

James Ramsey is a national safety director with Faith Technologies Incorporated (FTI), part of a team ensuring the safety of FTI team members through implementation of comprehensive training programs in occupational, industrial, and environmental safety. Ramsey holds master and journeyman electrician licenses for Colorado and Idaho and is an OSHA 500 authorized trainer for the 29 CFR Part 1926 construction standards.

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