

3

Factors That Define the Best Safety Cultures



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What makes a great workplace safety program? There are all sorts of templates for safety management systems out there.

Now – what makes a great workplace safety culture?

If you're thinking, *that's more difficult to define*, you're not alone.

Much has been said and written about how important safety culture is to reducing risks that lead to death, injuries and property damage.

And just like a great safety program, a great safety culture is going to look different from workplace to workplace.

However, there are three factors that are a must for a good safety culture:

1. Think more about the unique risks in your workplace.

For all the complaints about OSHA regulations, the truth of the matter is that most of the agency's regulations are the bare minimum

necessary for keeping employees safe.

It's one reason OSHA has its General Duty Clause: There's no way it can have regulations for everything possible that could go wrong in workplaces that would put employees at risk.

Violate OSHA standards, and you could receive some pretty big fines. Six-figure amounts are now common, and in some cases total penalties have reached into the millions of dollars.

But using OSHA compliance to create a safety culture only goes so far.

It's a culture of rules that's sustained by fear of violating them.

It's reactive, not proactive.

Meanwhile, elsewhere in the world, other countries have taken a different approach.

Other countries place the responsibility on the employer to determine the hazards in the workplace and the best ways to minimize them. This is not a "one-size-fits-all" approach.

In this type of safety culture, the onus is on employers to figure out safety for themselves (or with the assistance of worker councils and consultants).

Getting back to our goal, this model of identifying the unique risks and hazards in a workplace is the foundation of a great safety culture.

The focus isn't on trying to avoid OSHA citations and fines. Instead it's on the specifics of the individual workplace – and that includes the people working there, which leads to our next two factors.

2. Encourage employees to speak up about risks and hazards

When a company says its safety goal is zero injuries, do employees understand that's different than zero risk reports?

It's crucial they know the difference. The main reason: Early reporting avoids problems down the road.

NAVEX Global conducted research on getting employees to speak up about safety. Among the findings:

- When potential problems are reported early, companies are

more likely to address them before they become larger problems resulting in costly fines or litigation.

- Higher use of internal reports to solve potential problems indicates open communication between employees and management and a belief that issues will be addressed.

What's one of the top reasons employees don't speak up about risks and hazards?

They're concerned that they'll miss a deadline or quota. This is often referred to as "Production over Safety."

The message from the very top of a company – the C-suite – needs to be that it's never "Production or Safety." It's "Production and Safety."

Safety managers and supervisors say this can be one of the most difficult things to convince workers of.

And it's not necessarily your company's fault.

The days are gone when employees work for 30 or more years at one place and then retire. Workers are much more likely to move

from one employer to another then another, etc.

“Production over Safety” can be something they picked up at another employer, and the employee just assumes it’s the same at your company.

Sometimes it’s just a misunderstanding. At companies with good safety cultures, the statement, “We need to get this order out on time,” doesn’t mean, “We need to get this order out on time, and we’ll break safety rules if necessary to do it.”

So how do you convince employees that it’s not just OK for them to report risks and hazards, you WANT them to do it?

- **Make it public.** At a meeting, tell a story about how one of your employees brought a safety concern to a supervisor, what was done about it and how it made the workplace safer. Praise the employee who did this in front of their co-workers.
- **Follow up.** Sometimes, solving a safety problem takes time. Let the employee who brought the problem to your attention know that a fix is still in the works and the progress that’s been made. Make sure to follow up when a solution has been found and seek

out the employee's opinion on the fix.

- **Thank them.** If this seems to somewhat repeat our first bullet point – it's on purpose. You can't emphasize enough that you appreciate employees reporting risks and hazards. Do it publicly, privately and repeatedly.

3. Encourage employees to offer solutions

Who knows your workplace best? It's the employees who are out on the floor or in the field doing their jobs every day.

Then, it follows that these same employees are the best ones to suggest solutions for risks and hazards.

Once again, this will take encouragement. The amount will depend on how comfortable they feel reporting risks and hazards. After they've cleared that hurdle, it'll be easier to encourage them to think of solutions and bring them to you.

Some employees, due to past experiences, will think that coming up with solutions is what management does.

To counter that perception, encourage managers and supervisors to

work with employees on safety solutions.

If possible, carve out time for the employee to work on the problem.

Then, some of the same advice that applies to getting them to report problems applies to this. Be sure to give them encouragement. Discuss solutions at safety meetings where more employees can hear about how their co-workers are coming up with solutions.

And, of course, thank them.

A workplace with a good safety culture is one where employees are engaged in the safety process.

The message to them has to be clear: Safety isn't just the job of the Safety Manager and management team. It's everyone's job.

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