



Safety On The Frontlines: 5 Steps For Better Supervisor Safety Leadership

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Frontline supervisors have perhaps the most crucial role for a company's safety. And improving safety performance often comes down to how companies set their supervisors up for success.

Too often, supervisors see their job as primarily ensuring compliance with safety rules, said Judy Agnew, Vice President of Safety Solutions, Atlanta, at an ASSP Safety conference.

But compliance, Agnew said, only goes so far. Supervisors need to encourage workers to do the right thing all the time, even when they're not watching.

Here are five supervisory best practices that'll foster employee engagement and enhance safety performance:



1. Build relationships

It's no coincidence that supervisors who have strong relationships with their crews also tend to have safer crews. Supervisors can build better relationships by:

Treating direct reports like people, not just employees. Supervisors must demonstrate they truly care about their workers, particularly about their health and safety.

Asking more and talking less. Supervisors too often believe they're the "boss" and they have all the answers. By asking more than telling, supervisors will learn more about workers and make them feel more respected and valued.

Building trust. Supervisors must be vigilant about doing what they say they'll do, no matter how small. Every time a supervisor keeps his word, trust is built. Every time the opposite is true, trust erodes.



2. Relentlessly address hazards

The frontline supervisor is often the point person workers report hazards to. It's critical for supervisors to get hazards fixed through whatever organizational systems are in place.

It's not necessarily the supervisor's role to do this, but they should make it their responsibility. Workers gauge how important safety is to the company by management's willingness to invest in keeping the workplace safe.

Since supervisors are the face of management – and often the person who gets the hazard report – it's essential for them to be proactive about hazard remediation.



3. Conduct daily safety interactions

Unfortunately, some supervisors only initiate safety interactions when there are problems. But these interactions are critically important because they provide opportunities to ask questions, learn about hazards, address concerns and, most importantly, influence safety behaviors.

Supervisors who most successfully initiate safety interactions do so when things are going well just as often as when things aren't going well. Here are some tips for making interactions positive and effective:

Be specific. Vague statements like “good job” don't lead to improvement. Asking specific questions and pinpointing specific safety behaviors ensure meaningful conversations that lead to improvement.

Be sincere. Everyone can see through disingenuous attempts at interest in safety, so sincerity is important.

Interact frequently. The more frequently supervisors interact with workers, the more workers will believe safety is a priority. Being out in the field often allows supervisors to catch workers doing things that promote safety and provide the right reinforcement.



4. Respond positively to reporting

While hearing about accidents isn't a positive experience, shooting the messenger only makes things worse. Some supervisors inadvertently discourage reporting of minor incidents and near-misses by how they react.

A supervisor's reaction should be along the lines of, "Thanks for telling me, let's figure out how to prevent this from happening again." This isn't positive reinforcement for near-misses happening, but positive reinforcement for the honest reporting of those events.



5. Consider safety in every decision

Supervisor decisions have a direct impact on conditions and the day-to-day safe and at-risk behavior of workers. Examples of such decisions include which workers to pair up for a job, when to order replacement parts, whether to work the crew overtime, or how often to check in during a job.

Taking safety into consideration for every decision requires a good understanding of human behavior, and the ability to predict how decisions will impact workers and their safety on the front line.

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