

Six Steps to Building a Safety Culture

With workplace safety playing such an important role in increasing productivity, reducing turnover, and reducing workers' compensation insurance costs, companies are flocking to implement new safety programs. With a plethora of training and information available from insurance companies, consultants, and trade associations, why are some companies succeeding in creating a safety culture and some are not?

Here is a list of six very important items that many companies neglect to consider when developing a plan to reduce the number of workplace injuries and create a culture of total safety. All of these areas must be addressed in the strategic planning process because a failure to do so can dramatically decrease the probability of its long term success.

Strong mission and vision statement

This critical step lays the foundation of your new safety process and helps guide you throughout the implementation and beyond. It encompasses more than a fancy, well written ideology of the company and how you "are customer centric." I often see companies touting safety as "priority #1" yet they make no reference to this in their mission statement. If you make the claim that safety is your number one priority, your company mission statement must reflect this. If your goals include reducing the current number of injuries to zero in the next five years, it needs to be in your vision statement. By doing so, it creates the road map to follow instead of generic revenue goals.

Communication

Once the revised mission and vision statements are complete, communicate it to your employees. Not through the chain of command, but by holding a company wide event celebrating what you will achieve over a period of time. The company CEO or the most senior manager, must deliver a speech or presentation, highlighting the need for improved safety and shift in beliefs that dictate what they do on a daily basis. If the message of total safety is distributed through typical channels, email, memo's, etc, there can be misconstrued assumptions by your employees as to the reasons behind this effort and potentially derail its success. Make it clear to all of your employees that total safety is not just a trend, but a way of life. This will help prepare them for the changes to come and to the reasons why safety is important to the future of the company and their health and well-being.

Creating a Sense of Urgency

The last thing you want to do is take the time and effort into developing a great safety process and watch fail because you underestimated the status quo. With statistics showing the average American worker can expect to have one lost time injury in 33 years of work, employee complacency can become detrimental to your success. If an employee believes the probability of them becoming injured is remote, they will be more inclined to take short cuts if safety precautions are slowing them down. With employee's past successes at avoiding injury, their comfort zone increases which inadvertently increases the opportunity for them to become injured. Creating a sense of urgency will help drive these complacent employees out of their comfort zone and increase their level of awareness of the dangers they come across on a daily.

Build a Coalition

If it's you against the world, 98% of the time the world will win. However, if you are able to build a coalition of well respected employees that care about safety and improving the company, get them on your side and have them help build and implement your new total safety process. This includes management, supervisors, administrative staff, and front line employees. By including the rank and file of the company, every person will be represented and have a "voice" in the development and implementation of the safety process. If there are employees who are dissenters, just as in high school, peer pressure will help them conform to the new culture, or help drive them out.

Little Victories

If in your vision statement you say, "to reduce the number of recordable injuries from "X" to "Y" within two years from today," it doesn't mean you can't celebrate milestones in between. If this step is neglected, you risk losing the momentum and your new safety process will have become a "trend." As Thomas Peters once said, "Celebrate what you want to see more of." This strategy is much more effective than putting up new posters. It reinforces that a total safety culture is, and will continue to be, a top priority of the company.

Mission Accomplished

Just because you were able to meet some of your goals set forth in your vision statement, you cannot declare victory too soon. It takes years to change the culture of a company and if you take the foot off of the gas pedal, employees will revert back into their comfort zone and your safety process will regress. When an average company sees the first sign of success, they press the cruise control button. Slowly, but surely, the injuries will start to rise back up and they have to start the whole process over.

Leading this charge on total safety is not an easy one, and proper planning must take place in order for success to occur. Understand a safe workplace is not created through posters or procedures. Safety is created

through an ongoing process of successes and setbacks. Celebrate the victories and analyze the setbacks. Also remember that developing a total safety process where zero injuries are the norm, is not impossible, nor is it relegated to specific industries. Some of the most labor intensive industries, such as construction and manufacturing, have companies leading the way with zero injury cultures and are reaping the benefits of their hard work.

Jeff Slusser is a workers' compensation consultant with Hilmerson Safety Services, Inc. and can be reached at jeff.slusser@hilmersonservices.com or 952.224.9390.