

How Safety Management Leads to OPERATIONAL EXCELLENCE

By Matthew S. Ludwig

For safety professionals, the challenge has always been quantifying the value of sound safety management to executive leadership to obtain the supervisory and managerial buy in necessary to drive safety results. OSH professionals use OSHA regulations or insurance costs and loss data to justify resources for safety management.

Companies across the country

continue to roll the dice when it comes to injury prevention and employee safety despite regulatory actions, rising insurance costs and the fact that solid safety management is good business.

Putting a solid safety management system in place is not easy nor is it quick. Building a system of any type requires forethought, diligence, teamwork and commitment from every level of the organization. Understanding the overall culture of the organization is crucial in identifying what drives the decisions of leadership, management, supervisors and employees. For example, when investigating an employee incident, injury or near-hit, leaders must identify what decisions contributed to the outcome and why those decisions were made. Is the company culture focused on production numbers above all else? This may lead to supervisors ignoring or even promoting unsafe behavior to achieve production

results. Or is the company culture profit focused? This may lead to the company cutting costs or not allocating resources toward safety management. Does this sound familiar?

However, it is not all doom and gloom. Companies have found that putting forth the effort to build a solid safety management system will benefit the organization in ways that transcend just safety results. Sure, a good safety management system will positively affect safety results, but it does not stop there. In the process of developing, communicating, educating and evaluating safety management, leaders

and employees will learn skills to better identify, analyze and control hazards. Open communication between employees and supervisors is critical to safety improvement. When a workplace has a culture of open communication, employees feel comfortable bringing concerns to their supervisors and have confidence that the supervisor will address their concerns. The impact of this communication cannot be overstated. This point is illustrated in the following story of one company's progression from receiving poor safety results to becoming a culture of operational excellence.

By providing frontline supervisors and leaders with skills to promote healthy communication and a feedback loop that encourages honest, accurate information, companies will see more than just positive safety results. They will realize sustainable operational excellence.



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I was the safety manager at a company where the unhealthy culture throughout the organization was contributing to poor safety results. The company is a manufacturing plant with 450 unionized employees operating two production shifts 6 days a week. Most of the employees are unskilled and paid by the hour. Seven different native languages are spoken among the diverse workforce. Incident rates and days away restricted or transferred (DART) rates were higher than industry averages. Employees frequently abused workers' compensation and turnover was extremely high.

Through consultation with plant leadership, the decision was made to improve safety management in several ways. The first step was to understand employees' perceptions about safety. The company distributed a safety perception survey to all employees. The surveys were anonymous and employees were asked to complete them honestly. The survey gauged employees' perceptions of the following areas:

- executive leadership's commitment to worker safety;
- their direct supervisor's commitment to their safety;
- their coworkers' commitment to safety;
- their personal commitment to safety and the safety of their coworkers;
- whether they feel adequately trained to perform their jobs safely.

The results of the survey indicated that employees felt that executive leadership cared about their safety, which means the company did a good job of communicating safety concerns. However, employees did not feel that their direct supervisor cared about their safety. Many responses indicated that production was all that mattered and that employee safety did not. Many employees indicated that they did not feel adequately trained to safely perform their jobs. These results would drive how the company addressed its safety management system.

First, supervisors were provided training on how to identify, analyze and control hazards within their workstations. Additionally, supervisors were taught how to effectively train employees. Supervisors were responsible for conducting preshift safety talks with employees and many never had this responsibility before. Many supervisors had been promoted into leadership roles having never supervised employees. Many did not have the skills to evaluate employee

TABLE 1
RESULTS ACHIEVED AFTER 3 YEARS

The author was safety manager for a company where an unhealthy culture contributed to poor safety results. The organization set out to improve safety management. Over a 3-year period, the company realized tangible results.

| Metric | Day 1 | Year 3 |
|------------------------------|-----------|-----------|
| Total incident rate | 6.1 | 1.7 |
| DART rate | 2.2 | 0.9 |
| Units packed per minute | 25 | 34 |
| Units shipped per day | 55,000 | 61,000 |
| Average maintenance downtime | 3.8 hours | 2.6 hours |
| Safety committee members | 8 | 20 |
| Annual employee turnover | 27.8% | 10.2% |

performance, address performance issues or coach employees. Supervisors were provided skills training in employee relations, hazard awareness, employee training and incident investigation techniques including root-cause analysis.

Next, the company developed an employee recognition program to promote safe work behaviors and positive interaction between supervisors and employees. Supervisors were tasked with identifying ways to positively recognize employees. This could be as simple as acknowledging an employee who wore the required PPE during a work process or thanking an employee for making a safety suggestion. The recognition program accomplished two things: first, it required supervisors to start seeking out positive ways to acknowledge employees; second, it provided employees with a positive interaction with their supervisor. The goal was to focus on real-time activities (leading indicators) instead of recognizing employees for not getting hurt (lagging indicators). This initiative had positive effects on the supervisor-employee relationship.

The company addressed the training issues by revamping its job safety analysis (JSA) program. JSAs require scrutiny of a job function and its associated tasks. Once tasks have been determined, hazards are identified in each step along with the controls that are to be utilized to prevent injury. When developed and utilized

properly, JSAs can be used for employee training, hazard analysis and incident investigation. The program provides the opportunity to communicate with and train employees in the hazards they will face and how to control them. Following an incident, the JSA should be reviewed to ensure that it identified the specific hazard that contributed to the incident. If it did not, the JSA must be revised to include that hazard. If the hazard was identified, then it can be used to determine where a control failed. Finally, completing JSAs for each job function requires input from those employees who perform jobs and is another opportunity to engage supervisor-employee communication. Over a 3-year period, the company realized tangible results illustrated in Table 1.

Safety management is more than just identifying, analyzing and controlling hazards. It is about setting expectations, communicating those expectations, holding everyone accountable and constantly improving the system. Proactive leadership at all levels of an organization promotes a culture of continuous improvement. By providing frontline supervisors and leaders with skills to promote healthy communication and a feedback loop that encourages honest, accurate information, companies will see more than just positive safety results. They will realize sustainable operational excellence. **PSJ**

Matthew S. Ludwig, CSP, ARM, AINS, has 17 years' experience working as a safety professional. His experience includes manufacturing, distribution, transportation and risk management. He has worked as a risk management consultant for Nationwide Insurance since 2015 and is cofounder of the Capital Area Safety Council of Pennsylvania. Ludwig holds a B.S. in OSH from Columbia Southern University. He is a professional member of ASSP's Central Pennsylvania Chapter and a member of the Society's Risk Management/Insurance Practice Specialty.