

The Four Pillars of Safety

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Ask C-suite executives to identify the pillars of safety, and their responses likely will include training, risk management, PPE, monitoring, root cause analysis and culture. While all these relate to safety, they are in fact safety tactics and measurement tools rather than the support structure that truly promote a safe workplace.

For a true culture of safety to exist the “Four Pillars of Safety”: Engagement, Recognition, Communications, and Measurement must be in place. Only then can safety tactics and measurements be made effective and meaningful.

The First Pillar—Employee Engagement

Employee Engagement is a fundamental necessity without which lasting safety improvements and a good safety culture are virtually impossible. Engagement is defined as “an emotional involvement or commitment.” It is the connection point between employees and the people they interact with in their daily work. A single, somewhat daunting, statistic sums up the state of engagement today. According to a study from the Human Capital Institute, a mere 11 percent of today’s workforce demonstrates a very strong commitment to their organization. Consider too the results of a poll taken at an ISHN webinar entitled “Safety Soup,” asking attendees what they thought the percentage of committed employees was in their respective organizations. The consensus was 50-to-74 percent, revealing an important nexus between perception and reality on this issue.

The main reasons for a lack of employee commitment are the poor connections between employees and their immediate supervisors, as

well as employees and the myriad other people they interact with in their organization. Creating a more engaging environment and making or improving these connections, is a necessary first step in improving organizational safety, as it provides the opportunity to share best practices and work collaboratively for the benefit of all. The best safety professionals have come to realize, even if senior leadership has not, that cutting edge tools, tactics and data will not move the safety needle if workers are disengaged.

Safety managers may wonder why the responsibility for employee engagement falls to them instead of human resources or operations. While it may seem reasonable to expect that the company should provide an engaged workforce for BBS, audit processes, and training programs, this is not the case in most organizations. Because of their direct and daily interaction with employees, managers and supervisors are critical to the employee experience. For a safety sensitive workforce, this responsibility must be in the hands of the safety manager.

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To foster an engaged workforce, safety managers must start by asking themselves “What can I do to get everyone in my sphere of influence to connect better with the organization and their colleagues?” This is a good time for brainstorming and for involving other key managers and employees in doing the same. Each environment is different, and there is no one-size-fits-all solution, so white boarding every idea can be a good place to start. Some ideas to foster connections include:

- **Create a wellness program:** Employees get healthy together with weight loss and exercise competitions. Hire a permanent trainer, form teams and give awards to the best performers.
- **Trade places:** Use job shadowing, allow meeting crashers, and ask managers to work an occasional shift in different departments.
- **Encourage friendly competitions:** Create more ways to compete as individuals and teams on internal objectives such

as safety, or external things such as a bowling league.

- **Throw more parties:** Have breakfast gatherings or cookouts with families. Dole out recognition of accomplishments in front of families and co-workers.
- **Create a rewards system:** Publicly recognize and reward the best workers for their efforts and accomplishments. Create a centralized program site where people can redeem for tangible awards.
- **Ask the employees:** Broaden the request and get more employee feedback about how they like to be engaged.
- **Hang message boards:** Put up message boards around the company and draw attention to employee accomplishments both at work and in employees' home lives.
- **Hire an engagement officer:** Find and hire a person to promote engagement on a full-time basis.
- **Study the good ones:** Identify the most engaged workers and study what they do.
- **Break some rules:** Identify rules that are counterproductive, and show workers that change can be a good thing.
- **Encourage charitable contribution:** Identify five charities that employees can support as a group, and give workers paid time to take part in charitable activities.
- **Arrange group adventures:** Go zip lining, white water rafting, or create a paint ball league.

No matter what the suggestions, the more face-to-face, meaningful interactions that take place, the

better engaged the workforce will become. Whether you resolve to switch to in-person training (instead of electronic), or to create a bowling league to deepen relationships between teammates, person-to-person interactions are a fundamental piece of the puzzle – especially as the world grows increasingly more distracted and workforces become more scattered.

The Second Pillar – Recognition

Employee Recognition creates energy throughout an organization as people are given credit for their accomplishments and shown gratitude for their efforts. When people are surveyed to determine why they left a job, “lack of recognition” and “compensation” consistently rank as the top two reasons, regardless of economic conditions. Conventional wisdom might suggest that nothing could compete with compensation as the top motivator of job change, but the data is clear: Recognition is vital to employee engagement and long-term loyalty.

People have a basic, fundamental need to know that their efforts are not going unnoticed. The need for appreciation not only drives our personal behaviors, but also is at play in the workplace. This need is powerful enough to affect how they work (including how safely they work) and to motivate or demotivate them. The impact of positive praise lasts a long time. Most employees will attest to keeping plaques, certificates, or emails from customers, employees, and suppliers that recognize their efforts and achievements. Recognition is a validation of our efforts, a sign of our success, and it gives meaning to all that we do. In a workplace environment it is the energy that flows and pushes workers and their companies to new heights.

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As with every other business tactic, there are ways to maximize the impact of your recognition strategy. When looking to motivate safer behavior, the safety managers must assure that recognition should be:

- **Timely:** This is the most crucial factor because the more time that goes by between the actions of an employee and the recognition of those actions, the less effective that recognition will be. “You did a great job last year on that project” is far less impactful than “You did a great job yesterday on that project.” Missing an opportunity to recognize someone altogether can be devastating to the employee. Imagine the employee with 10 years on the job and a perfect safety record who no one noticed. The message sent to the employee and the community is that safety does not matter.
- **Face-to-Face:** With the exception of long-haul trucking and virtual workforces, it is relatively easy for managers to get in front of the workers they wish to recognize.

Posting a “nice job” on a physical or digital bulletin board (if not accompanied by a face-to-face meeting as well) is a hollow way of recognizing someone’s efforts. Dropping a note on someone’s desk, including a pay check stuffer, or sending an email are better than nothing, but they still are not nearly as powerful as in-person recognition, where the recipient can read facial expressions and body language and truly gauge the appreciation for their efforts.

- **Rewarding:** While not all recognition events need to be attached to a reward, most should. People are motivated by rewards and adding a “token” to your expression of appreciation has a multiplier effect on the power of the moment. Consider that the average American household participates in 18 customer loyalty programs (grocery stores, gas stations, credit cards, airline miles, etc.) and the companies that offer such programs do so because they motivate behavior. A similar dynamic is at play with workers, and rewarding employees at appropriate levels adds more buzz and motivational power to a recognition program.
- **Tangible:** Whenever possibly there should be a tangible delivery vehicle for recognition, regardless of whether or not there is a reward attached to it. Consider the football player who is applauded for making a good hit and rewarded with a sticker to put on his helmet as a tangible display of the accomplishment. A certificate presented by a safety manager or supervisor stating that a safety suggestion was the best one submitted has the greatest impact. The tangible element of

that certificate, or tangible reward (TV, jacket, fishing pole), reinforces the power of that recognition event and extends the experience every time that reward is used or put on display.

- **Public:** More often than not workers will find a recognition event to be more powerful when it occurs in front of their co-workers (there are some exceptions to this rule, and managers should be careful to know their workers before committing to a public event). Being recognized in front of one’s peers helps legitimize the accomplishment for those receiving the recognition. It allows them to climb higher on the needs pyramid (Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs) to reach the self-esteem level, which is characterized as a point in a person’s development in which they desire recognition and respect. Reaching this level on Maslow’s chart allows a worker to bask in the glow of their accomplishments without the need for self-promotion.
- **Genuine:** Recognition must be authentic and not be perceived as a manager simply doing a duty. If recognition seems inauthentic to the recipient then it will not have a positive effect and may even have a negative impact. Workers want to be recognized, but will see pandering for what it is and will not respond well to false praise. This can be the most difficult area of recognition for companies to control since it is a reflection of the personalities of those in charge of engagement and recognition. Effecting change on those personalities can be a challenging task.

An employee, who receives timely, public recognition of their accomplishments, while being

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rewarded with a tangible token of appreciation and occasionally tangible awards, will respond with greater discretionary effort to earn additional respect and recognition. For that reason recognition is an important tool for supporting the behaviors needed for a great safety culture.

The Third Pillar – Employee Communications

Employee Communications are essential for allowing accurate and timely messaging to flow freely throughout an organization. Marketing and communications strategies are crucial components of any effective safety program. To maximize communication effectiveness, it is important to have a “brand” that people can sink their teeth into. People are preconditioned to respond to brands and to ascribe greater value to brands they believe in and trust. For safety managers, the brand to protect and uphold is the company’s safety brand, which should be ubiquitous throughout the organization.

A safety brand should reflect the organization's true beliefs about keeping its workers safe on the job. Many companies, particularly those in safety-challenged industries, define core beliefs in their mission statements and already have a mantra for safety. When a safety mantra already exists, a safety manager should enhance and expand that message for use in its safety recognition program. When one does not exist, the message must be created to make clear that safety is a priority for the organization. It is a best practice to encapsulate this ideology and promote it to workers.

The brand should be promoted throughout the organization in newsletters, on the customer facing website, and intranet site. It should find its way onto posters, flyers, paycheck stuffers, personal protective equipment and coffee mugs. The effort to communicate a safety brand needs to be ongoing, not a one-time event. A tattered poster hanging on the wall that has not been updated in years sends the message that the program and the safety steps behind it are not priorities. The challenges of promoting a safe work environment are dynamic and so too must be your strategies for dealing with evolving workplace safety issues.

Communications also present an opportunity to spread the word about safety recognition and rewards program and capture the attention of the safety-sensitive audience. Continuous communication and promotion of new and ongoing initiatives help change behaviors and reinforce safe work practices. One example of a company that does it right is Republic Services (LOCATION) which is now in its ninth year of its Dedicated to Safety (DTS) Program. The DTS Program has been the primary communications tool

for safety information and standards and a significant contributor to the company's outstanding safety record. The DTS Program also increased the volume of visitors to the intranet site, where other vital information was available to employees, which was an ancillary benefit of the safety recognition rewards program.

Well-designed recognition program websites must also provide a place for workers to bank and redeem the points they have earned for safe work practices. In addition these sites can display news stories, graphics, videos and more to reinforce the message of proactive safe work. They should also utilize surveys and quizzes to make the communications bi-directional and to reinforce training. Best in class sites are be "sticky" so that workers that visit are compelled to stay longer and, as a result, better absorb the safety messaging. Capturing workers' attention in this way creates a more memorable experience and makes it easier to gain adoption of future initiatives.

In addition to the award website (program hub), the following communication elements also can extend and promote the safety message:

- **Award Catalogs:** These catalogs typically display a small subset of the awards available in the program, allowing participants who do not have web access to place their orders. Their primary benefit is that they tend to be kept in the home where they serve as a reminder of the value the company places on safe work habits.
- **Automated Emails and Texts:** Many program sites include built-in email functions that communicate automatically and send messaging to participants

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when they place an order or when an order is shipped. They often can push emails to participants when points are added to their accounts, enough points are earned for a wish list item, or a new quiz is available. These emails must be customized and are very useful ways of promoting new initiatives.

- **Point Vouchers:** The best way to reward someone for performance in a safety recognition program is with face-to-face interactions coupled with tangible awards. Some programs use printed vouchers that include the branding and messaging of the program. Handing someone a tangible manifestation of the points they have earned (often in front of their peers) reinforces the recognition portion of the program.
- **Printed Materials:** Other printed pieces including posters, flyers, letters, and surveys extend the messaging and remind participants of the benefits of

safe work. These items serve as reminders in the hallways and throughout the work environment and help to complete the full-circle messaging.

- **Videos and Multi-Media:** People have become increasingly comfortable with on-line video content, making video messages a great way to insure that the features and benefits of your program are properly understood and internalized by your workers.
- **Social Media:** Social media adds emphasis to your programs, giving participants a place to share their thoughts, best practices, and experiences about the company's safety culture. It also allows informal recognition between colleagues in a public forum.
- **Promotional Products:** Giving a custom-branded item of value for going "above and beyond" (such as a jacket for a long time safe worker) will catch the attention of everyone involved. These effective tools are also a great way to gain attention when launching a new program or promoting a specific component.

Once an organization has put solid safety recognition and rewards program in place, a consistent effort to communicate it to the workforce is as essential as the program itself. Even the best designed program is destined to fail if not properly communicated to its target audience.

The Fourth Pillar – Data Measurement

Data Measurement is the input stream necessary to make informed decisions about both the initial design and ongoing enhancements for your safety recognition and rewards program. Safety programs take thoughtful

preparation, execution, and investment. While well-designed and executed programs always result in a positive return on investment, an initial investment is always required to achieve those long-term savings. It may be surprising to learn that only about one in five companies measure the results of their programs, despite the planning and investment required. Even those companies that measure results often do an incomplete job, thereby failing to take full advantage of the data they actually do receive. It is a best practice to plan for program measurement at the outset. Measurement tools should be implemented across a wide range of data points, which can cross-pollinate (and triangulate) the data received to result in more actionable reports.

Planning ahead involves discovery. A good place to start is by determining what stakeholders would like to know about the program's future impact. By taking action prior to a program launch, you can establish base-line data and pre-launch surveys or assessments to set important initial benchmarks. These are obviously essential to compare year over year results.

Surveys are crucial tools for documenting workers' attitudes and behaviors related to safety before the implementation of the program designed to affect their behavior. They provide the qualitative data that can be as important and informative as the quantitative data that will come from typical safety and HR reports. Surveys are also a good way to capture the realities of the workplace, regardless of the perceptions of management. This data is extremely valuable when combined and mapped alongside other data points, as it helps to create a complete picture. There are countless examples of what can be measured and how survey questions can be asked, including:

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On a scale of one 1-10 with 10 being the best:

- How safe do you think your company is?
- How seriously do workers take job safety?
- How seriously does management take worker safety?
- How much does your supervisor know about what it takes for you to be safe at work?
- How helpful has your safety training been?

The results from questions such as these will be particularly valuable as the program matures and as changes in workers' perceptions evolve. Wherever possible, data points should be related one to another in analysis, to create the most complete picture possible of the workplace environment. This provides a clear line of sight for company leadership to move closer to organizational safety goals. Some examples of helpful reporting include:

- Claim Count Trends Compared to Employee Turnover
- Incident Rate Relative to Earnings per Share (or Profitability)
- Employee Perceptions of Safety Before and After Program Launch
- Correlation of Training Reinforcement, Employee Engagement Levels, and Loss Pick Deviations
- Incident Rate for Employees That Have or Have Not Earned “Above & Beyond” Safety Points This Month (or quarter or year)
- Sales Trends Correlated to OSHA Incident Rate Trends & Employee Perceptions of Management

The outcome should confirm the effect a safety program is having on overall operations.

A professional recognition and reward provider with experience in developing safety programs can be an important partner in developing the initial data and analyzing results throughout the program. Many full-service recognition and rewards program providers build

measurement into their solutions, including survey and quiz tools which can be deployed at a moment’s notice to continually capture data. These providers also offer sub-administration portals and on-staff experts to help produce and analyze multiple data points simultaneously and generate regular and ad-hoc reports. They also help their clients actively manage the program calendar to insure that program messaging on safety objectives is timely and relevant.

In an increasingly digitized environment, the most effective companies rely on accurate data to successfully establish organizational direction. Safety recognition and rewards solutions are data collecting “super-programs” because they enable employers to engage with their employees to gather such data. Once the data is in hand, it is critical that companies use it effectively to facilitate continuous solution improvements.

There is no question that the cost of an unsafe workplace is staggering. In fact OSHA estimates that employers

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pay almost \$1 billion per week for direct workers' compensation costs alone. Reducing this number is possible, but not without safety programs with support structures that include engagement, recognition, communication and measurement. Only with these “four pillars of safety” in place can companies begin to build a foundation for change. ■

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