# Empower Your Change Drivers: Strategies for Engaging Employees in Safety Culture Improvement

**Brett Haskins, CSP**

**Understanding how to successfully engage and empower your workforce IS KEY TO ENSURING THAT YOUR ORGANIZATION CAN START AND CONTINUE THE JOURNEY toward safety culture excellence.**

EMPOWERING FRONT-LINE WORKERS—THOSE who stand to benefit the most from an effective safety process—is a concept that has been talked about much over the last decade, yet many organizations that start the journey seem to stop abruptly. Regardless of the reason for derailment, a failed attempt can have a lasting negative impact on safety culture. From the front-line employee's perspective, it could appear that another flavor-of-the-month safety program has been whisked away and replaced with more important initiatives (i.e. production, quality, etc.).

Understanding how to successfully engage and empower your workforce is key to ensuring that your organization can start and continue the journey toward safety culture excellence.

## Identifying Cultural Influencers

Stated simply, safety culture is how you do things. It is your walk, your talk, your actions, your beliefs. It is what you do without even thinking about it. Culture includes the norms, attitudes, beliefs and ideas of your workforce. Understanding these beliefs and perceptions of the workforce is the first step in identifying the areas in which you should focus the improvement efforts.

Imagine, for example, there is an injury at your workplace. The injured worker performed an at-risk behavior that resulted in the injury. As a matter of fact, about 90 percent of all injuries are related to at-risk behaviors. Why is this? Why do people take safety risks? Is it because they want to get injured? Absolutely not! It is because something has created or influenced an attitude, belief or idea that the act will not result in injury or that something else is more important. These influencers can be defined as the "norms" of the culture and include, but are not limited to: pressures to produce more, to be more efficient, to save time, company values and management systems, past experiences that did not result in injury and a lack of risk awareness. Addressing these influencers is a large part of what safety culture improvement is about, and success requires involving all the right people in the building process.

## Involving the Front-Line Workforce

Unfortunately, those most commonly charged with developing and writing standard work procedures and safety policies/procedures are engineers and safety professionals, many of whom have never performed the specific tasks for which they are writing procedures. Further, their experience with the requirements of such documents is limited to regulatory text or incident investigations. The point is that very seldom do we engage the people performing the actual work in the creation and documentation of the work requirements. Failure to do so can create gaps in those procedures, and when those gaps align with influencers, as mentioned earlier, the risk of injury is more likely. Engineers and safety professionals have important roles to play in the workplace, but it is critical that employees who perform the day-to-day front-line activities be involved in developing procedural documents, within



Caterpillar Safety Services facilitates cultural improvement workshops to engage employees in developing solutions that integrate safety activities into daily processes.

Photo courtesy of Caterpillar Safety Services.

the boundaries set by the management team and regulations. Additionally, involving the front-line workforce gives these employees a sense of ownership that will result in greater compliance and honest assessment about whether the system truly works.

The most successful organizations employ this employee engagement technique not only in developing improvements to current safety policies and procedures, but also in error-proofing existing safety processes. Employees volunteer to participate on teams that create improved safety accountabilities around these processes, focusing on the things that leaders can control. Such accountabilities must be connected through all employee levels of the organization and must be flexible enough to be applied effectively in each work group or team. These accountabilities then become their own leading metrics. Engaging the front-line workforce in determining what a high quality pre-shift safety meeting looks like, in identifying the appropriate items to be placed on an inspection checklist, in deciding what a pre-task risk assessment should include, in determining what training requirements should be included and what opportunities there are to recognize good performers, helps to show that management trusts the judgment of the front line and, in turn, creates a more positive perception toward safety.

This is not a new approach to managing and improving safety. In fact, it is the same improvement process that has proven successful in other important areas of business. The words "continuous" or "continual" have been used for many years to describe a system for making incremental improvements in business processes over the long term. Why not use the same system to manage safety? The process is not easy, but it is fairly simple. Start by assessing the current state of the safety culture, then build a strategy, develop needed improvements through conducting rapid improvement workshops, pilot those improvements

in small sample sizes, make any necessary adjustments and complete a full roll out to the workforce, then check performance. This cycle continues to be repeated over the long term. Additionally, as new safety programs, policies, etc. are created, the front line should be engaged sooner, rather than later.

## Managing Safety

Traditionally, safety management has been left up to the safety professional and change has been driven by the measurement of things that we did not intend to happen (injuries). Results-based indicators provide some degree of benefit to management teams as such measurements tracked over the long term can provide evidence that a safety system is going in the right, or wrong, direction. However, most employees cannot explain how injury rates are calculated and this management approach provides very little in the way of employee engagement and ownership. Managing safety through the things that people can control and influence (activities) and engaging the right people in designing what those activities look like provides an organization with a better opportunity to measure performance and recognize success (accountability), which leads to the development of a culture of safety excellence.

Changing a culture is difficult and takes persistence and consistency, the same diligence required in other business system improvement efforts. Using proven business management principles, engaging and empowering the workforce, allowing for flexibility where it is needed and holding everyone accountable are the only methods sure to deliver consistent results. | **WA**

*Brett Haskins, CSP, is Senior Safety Consultant for Caterpillar Safety Services. He can be reached at Haskins_Brett_M@cat.com. For more information about Caterpillar's safety culture solutions, visit safety.cat.com.*