The View of the Top

Employee perceptions of how management views safety can shape the reality of their behavior. What's the perception among your staff?

by Zach Knoop

Here are four ways top management can visibly demonstrate commitment to achieving safety excellence.

"For many, many years I had in my mind we were a real 'safety' company, because that was all that was ever preached to us. Safety first. We've always had safety meetings. We always had incentive programs. We had safety dinners back when I was younger. But were we really safe? Did we really believe safety? And it really made me question myself and this company after we got into these other safety programs. Did we really believe that, or was production really the primary thing? Unfortunately, I have to say, we addressed safety when it became an issue. We always preached safety, but we didn't address safety until it was an issue to us. That's what's really sad."

These are the words of Daryl Moomey, a vice president at Dolese Bros. Co. based in Oklahoma City, Okla., (an aggregate and ready-mix supplier in Oklahoma), and I expect what he described is a current reality for many organizations. Most leaders' hearts and intentions are in the right place — they don't want anybody to get hurt. Employees, however, can't see a leader's intentions. Employees judge what is important to leaders by their visible actions.

So how can leaders put their intentions into action, and why is it critical that they do so? According to Dr. Dan Petersen, who is considered by many to be the father of modern day safety management, one of his Six Criteria for Safety Excellence is that "Top Management must Demonstrate its Visible Commitment to Safety." This is moving beyond "supporting" safety by allowing for the purchase of personal protective equipment, providing time for safety training, and signing a safety policy that was written by the safety director. It is about defining the leader's role in managing safety through establishing "actionable" safety accountabilities that cascade down through the organization.

A robust safety system will have clearly defined and integrated safety activities for all levels of the organization that are regularly measured and incorporated into performance evaluations, just like other business functions. This takes time and effort to establish. There are, however, simple ways in which all leaders can demonstrate their visible commitment to safety.

1 Integrate a safety message into regular business discussions with subordinates, leaders, and all employees at every opportunity. As you talk about production, quality, customer service, and finance in your business communications, safety should also be discussed. All too often, leaders only address safety when something bad happens, such as an injury, property damage, or MSHA citation. If those things are not occurring, safety tends to take a back seat to production, quality, and so forth. A simple exercise to evaluate the frequency of your safety communications compared to communications around other business functions is to look at your email sent folder. In the last month, how many emails did you send addressing safety, compared to emails related to production or quality? Of the emails sent about safety, how many were positive messages that recognized safe behaviors?

2 Personally model all the safety behaviors you expect of others in the workplace. There are many ways to do this. One is simply by carrying personal protective equipment in your vehicle when visiting work sites so you are prepared to demonstrate your visible commitment at all times by wearing the appropriate personal protective equipment. Your employees are always watching the leaders of the organization and what the employees see shapes their perception of what is important to you and the organization. In his

program, *The Challenge of Change*, Dr. Petersen says that management credibility in safety is earned over time and based on the decisions they make, how they reward/recognize employees for safety, the measurements used (lagging versus leading indicators), money spent or not spent on safety, and their visibility within the safety system. I personally have never met a CEO, owner, or vice president of a company that didn't profess support and desire for a safe workplace, but as Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Your actions speak so loudly, I cannot hear the words you say." Role model all desired safety behaviors 24/7 — at home and at work. If your company does not allow employees to talk on their cell phones while driving company vehicles, what message will it send if you are seen doing it in your personal vehicle?

3 Visit your work sites a few times per year to observe safety in action and provide positive feedback to employees on identified safe behaviors and safe conditions. You may have to be intentional in doing this by scheduling work site visits on your calendar. You might even have to bring your safety professional with you if you're unsure of what to look for. A former CEO/president of a large construction materials and heavy civil contracting company that I used to work for would frequently fly to various locations to participate in safety improvement team report-outs to local management and spend time in the field getting to know employees. There was no question about where he stood when it came to safety. Another division president would gather his management team into a van and visit as many operations as possible in a couple days. At each location, they would stop work, gather the troops, and spend time listening to them — truly understanding their unique challenges.

"When the employees see that their ideas matter and their ideas count, then they'll believe we are truly committed to safety. We have to show that. If they tell us they want to do something because they believe it will make a positive difference, then we'll do it," says Ed Kernaughan, vice president/general manager

of J.F. Shea Co., Inc. — Redding (a supplier of aggregate materials and highway/bridge construction in Northern California), as he emphasizes the importance of top leadership listening to and engaging with their employees. "And there may be some things we'll do that we think are kind of crazy, but part of the cultural transformation is employees seeing that, as management, we're doing what they want us to do."

Keep in mind, when it comes to understanding your organization's safety culture, perceptions are reality. Do you know what perception your employees have on how safety is being managed?

4 Take every opportunity to kick off safety meetings and training sessions, such as MSHA Annual Refresher training. Demonstrate to your employees that safety is important to you by verbally communicating your personal perspective of its value to the organization. Stay a while, if possible, to let employees see you in action and to get to know you better.

At the end of the day, what employees want to know is whether their organization cares about their safety. When they repeatedly see actions that align with what top leadership is saying about safety, perceptions and beliefs start to change. As reflected in their earlier sentiments, leaders at Dolese Bros. Co. and J.F. Shea Co., Inc. know that safety excellence starts with the tone they set from the top, but materializes through the engagement of their employees who know that the organization is truly committed to safety as a value.

Leaders, I encourage you to follow Moomey and Kernaughan's example, by getting out and about throughout your organization to visibly demonstrate how important safety is to you. **AM**

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