It is logical to think that one level in the organization holds the key to safety performance? Often times, we speak of the importance of top management in setting the “tone from the top” and supervisors leading the daily charge in ensuring safe work conditions and safe employee behavior. There is no doubt that top management and supervisors play a key role in an effective safety system, but are they the “key?”

Who is responsible for restating and putting top management’s commitment into action? Who is responsible for holding supervisors accountable for leading the daily charge in safety? The answer is middle management. A glaring problem with most traditional safety systems is that they ignore the role of middle management within the system. This group tends to be absent from the process, so the work of managing safety is left to the safety director or supervisors, who do what they can and hope for the best.

“You do not produce safety with middle management, but you cannot produce safety without it,” said Dr. Dan Petersen, who established the Six Criteria for Safety Excellence. In other words, middle managers are a key component of a successful safety system. It is quite simple; supervisors will do what they believe is important to their boss — “they will react and respond to the priorities, the wishes, the measures, and rewards,” as defined by their boss. The company safety director is typically not the boss of your front-line supervisors and foremen, and, therefore, will be more challenged in influencing supervisory safety performance without the active involvement of middle management.

So what is the role of middle management in establishing safety as an organizational value and in driving safety performance? In Petersen’s Six Criteria, the second criterion dictates that middle management be actively involved. According to Petersen, the role of middle managers in actively demonstrating their commitment to safety is threefold and should be no different from how they manage quality and production. The three requirements of middle managers are:
Stuck in the Middle?

Top management is visibly committed.

Middle management is actively involved.

Front-line supervision is performance-focused.

Employees are actively participating.

System is flexible to accommodate the culture.

Safety system is positively perceived by the workforce.

Six Criteria for Safety Excellence

1. Ensure supervisory performance of safety-related activities. Supervisors have to understand that safety is part of their scorecard. If not, they are less likely to demand safe production from their employees. Middle managers can ensure supervisory performance by requiring, reviewing, and responding to safety reports from supervisors on their defined safety activities, and by participating in various safety activities with their supervisor.

2. Ensure the quality of supervisory performance of safety-related activities. Performance measurements have to go beyond looking only at lagging indicators (injury statistics) and reports that indicate whether supervisors are completing safety tasks (quantity). There must be a quality check by the manager to determine how well the safety activities are being executed. An ineffective safety meeting with employees does nothing to improve safety. The role of the manager is then to periodically conduct spot checks on the defined safety activities and measure them against the quality standards. Where performance issues are noted, the manager can help to improve the skills necessary to meet the desired expectations. Managers can also inspire the continuation of performing quality safety activities by recognizing supervisors when they do a good job.

3. Demonstrate your belief that safety is important. There are many activities that middle management can perform to achieve this. Here are a few to consider:
   a. MBWA, or Management By Walking Around — make yourself visible to the workforce and model safe behavior. Spend time talking to employees about safety and focus on being positive and catching people doing things right.
   b. Participate as often as you can in safety meetings, workplace examinations, and other safety activities.
   c. Hold one-on-one meetings with your supervisors to discuss safety and how you can support them.
   d. Provide your supervisors with the necessary time to complete their safety activities and provide ongoing safety training to their employees.
   e. Prepare a routine safety report for your boss based on safety reports from your supervisors.

The Six Criteria suggest there isn’t a singular key to safety performance, or an individual group within an organization whose involvement makes or breaks the culture. Rather, we could liken the criteria to a combination lock in which the alignment of multiple digits grants access to peak performance.

In the October issue, I explained how top management aligns itself with the goal through visible commitment. Now, we know how middle managers can lock into the effort. In next month’s issue, we will look at the critical role supervisors play in a culture of safety excellence. AM

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