In last month’s issue, I explored the role that middle managers play in embedding safety as a core value into the organization. One of those critical roles is to hold supervisors accountable for successfully completing defined and agreed-upon safety activities that, if done well, will result in improved safety performance. Now, we take a closer look at the role of a supervisor in creating safety excellence.

A fundamental mistake that many organizations make when measuring safety performance is equating the absence of accidents with success. If you cannot generate a list of specific, measurable safety activities being done on a regular basis to ensure the absence of accidents, then your incident rate may be the product of luck and chance, not the result of an effective safety system.

Every organization’s goal is (or should be) the complete elimination of injuries. Liven your safety management system to a river on which the results you want to achieve are located downstream. What occurs upstream determines what happens downstream, so, in order to achieve zero-incident performance, you must fulfill specific activities upstream. When the focus is placed on manageable, controllable upstream safety activities or processes (leading indicators), rather than solely on uncontrollable downstream results (lagging indicators), safety excellence can be achieved and sustained.

So where does the supervisor fit into this system? To the majority of your workforce, the frontline supervisor is the boss, and therefore has the greatest ability to influence the behaviors of your workers. It is quite common in the aggregates industry to promote from within the organization. Most supervisors were, at one time, a member of the crew that they now supervise and were elevated to that position due to their ability to accomplish tasks efficiently and effectively. I have found that very few supervisors were promoted to the position because they were the safest employee on the crew. When they become supervisors, they are rarely given expectations for safety and may not know how their safety performance will be measured or the extent of their authority.

Safety management expert Dr. Dan Petersen, who...
first identified the Six Criteria for Safety Excellence, found that organizations which achieved excellence in safety had supervisors who were held accountable for performance, not results. In other words, they were not held accountable for results based on lagging indicators (recordable incident rates), but rather on performing safety activities in a quality way. This was demonstrated in every industry Petersen studied and in organizations located throughout the world. Too often, we tell supervisors to make sure nobody gets hurt on the job without providing them with specific instructions for how to meet that demand.

What, then, can a supervisor do to ensure the crew goes home safely? Interestingly, Petersen found through his research that there did not seem to be any particular supervisory safety activities that were more important than others. The research suggested, as indicated in his Implementing Safety Accountability program, “what is most important is that the supervisor do something regularly, daily, to emphasize the importance of safety.”

As a starting point, Petersen identified four specific tasks a supervisor can perform which will reinforce safety as a core value of the organization and deliver results when conducted in a quality way.

1. Investigating incidents to determine causes. It should be a supervisor’s responsibility to thoroughly investigate all incidents, with the focus on determining root cause, not assigning blame.

2. Inspect the work area to identify hazards. This can be done as part of a daily walkthrough, job hazard analysis, or by engaging employees in periodic hazard hunts.

3. Coaching employees to perform better. Train your supervisors to look for teachable moments. Every day, there are opportunities for supervisors to have safety conversations that reinforce desired safe work behaviors, rather than waiting for a formal safety violation or incident investigation. Observation programs and value-added safety meetings are processes that can be effectively used to coach employees to perform better.

4. Creating a positive and motivating environment. We tend to do a much better job of catching people doing things wrong, versus catching them doing things right. This is especially true in safety. Two simple things supervisors can do to create a positive and motivating environment and avoid a negative perception of safety from developing are: A) Frequently recognize employees for what they do right, and B) Ensure employee participation in the safety process. Both of these are easier said than done, especially the recognition component. All supervisors have had training on the rules and regulations that pertain to safety, so they have a good idea of what employees are not supposed to do. However, most supervisors lack the skills for engaging in meaningful conversations with employees, especially one-on-one conversations, and providing positive recognition. The good news is that such capabilities can be taught through skills training and can be measured.

I encourage you to assess your supervisors’ perceptions of their role in delivering safety excellence. On a spectrum ranging from total acceptance of safety to flat rejection, where do you think your supervisors are located? In next month’s issue, I will examine the fourth of Petersen’s Six Criteria of Safety Excellence, active engagement and participation of employees in the safety system. AM

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