



Employee Involvement

To achieve a sustainable culture change, employees must be meaningfully engaged and empowered.

by Zach Knoop

I have heard repeatedly from leaders of organizations looking to improve their safety performance that they want their employees to take responsibility for safety. And I have seen countless organizations try and fail to make this culture shift through traditional approaches to managing safety. What has proven to be effective, not only in safety, but in other business functions as well, is when the management system encourages active employee involvement in the activities that are meant to keep them safe.

In 40+ years of working with organizations around the world, safety management expert Dr. Dan Petersen identified the active participation of employees working within the safety system as an essential ingredient to achieve success in safety. It is one of his six criteria in establishing a culture of safety excellence, but fully understanding the benefits of active participation, and how the management system either supports or inhibits it, eludes many organizations.

According to the group of safety thought leaders with whom I work at Caterpillar, active participation requires ever-open avenues and channels where people feel a welcome invitation to get involved. It is more than creating a "suggestion box," attending a safety meeting, or observing someone

work; it's about actively soliciting and valuing employee involvement and engagement. It cannot be created artificially, and it cannot be bought. Active participation will also not be achieved through leadership mandates. Participation is a desire that comes from within. People respond to how they are treated and rarely to a strategy of sudden participation. Participation will never work as long as it is treated as a device to get somebody else to do what you want. Participation must be based on respect, fairness, transparency, strong two-way communication, and principles that recognize the empowerment of what it means to be human.

Dr. Petersen wrote an entire book on the subject of employee involvement titled *Authentic Involvement*. In it, he stated that authentic involvement should be every organization's ultimate goal. He defined authentic involvement as "worker participation where the worker engages in activities that satisfy that person's human needs, and thus are motivational."

Truth be told, the frontline employee, that miner working on the crushing spread, often times has the best understanding of the hazards that are present and how to resolve the safety issues. Given the chance to be engaged in the safety process, frontline employees will offer practical, often

novel ideas for safety improvement. The number one way to enhance employee involvement in your safety initiatives is to invite them to be problem solvers.

One organization that has shifted away from leadership mandates to an approach that not only seeks the opinions of its frontline employees on safety issues, but capitalizes on their problem-solving capabilities is Dolese Bros. Co. Leaders at the Oklahoma City-based company have engaged their hourly employees and frontline supervisors in safety improvement teams to solve specific issues, much different from the typical safety committee (Dr. Petersen views safety committees as one of the least effective routes to employee involvement). A continuous improvement team member at Dolese recently shared his thoughts about the cultural shift taking place. "This is a really big deal, very exciting, for everyone on the safety continuous improvement team. This is the only time I've ever seen upper management ask for hourly employee opinions, and it makes sense. We're the ones ultimately seeing and dealing with the issues."

The benefits of active employee participation or creating a culture of authentic involvement go way beyond safety, as this approach will positively contribute to:

- Employee retention and job satisfaction;
- Improvements in quality and customer service due to elevated pride in the work being performed; and
- Opportunities to improve production through the same involvement process being applied to safety.

Within your organization, there are numerous ways to ensure employee involvement in safety. On a day-to-day basis, consider the following opportunities:

- On some frequency, establish management presence on the job site. Management's role is to show up positively by asking employees questions on the work they are performing, how it can be done safer, recognizing what they are

Six Criteria for Safety Excellence

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.

doing well, and generally showing care.

- Provide supervisors with skills training, as identified in my article in the December issue, on how to identify and capitalize on *teachable moments* throughout the day to reinforce the desired behaviors and positively coach up employees.
- Actively engage employees in conducting safety meetings (or at least creating engaging safety meetings), conducting a job hazard analysis with their supervisor, and spending time looking for hazards or making inspections.

Consider creating improvement teams consisting of frontline employees, supervisors, and an executive sponsor to solve specific safety issues. These teams can work on improving existing safety processes, such as a management-mandated, behavior-based program (observation program), or improving the safety toolbox talks to be meaningful to frontline employees.

The question is are you ready and willing to listen to, involve, and engage your employees in improving your organization's safety system? Would you describe your current safety management systems as any one of the following?

- Compliance and regulations-focused;
- Command and control (top down mandates);
- Luck and hope; or
- Behavior-based.

If your answer is yes, then it will take

time to establish an engagement-based safety management system that meets the definitions of active participation and authentic involvement. I started this article by saying leaders want and desire employees who will take responsibility for safety. As Dr. Petersen said in his book *Authentic Involvement*, "... employees are perfectly willing to accept their 'responsibility' when management has first demonstrated that they are fulfilling their 'responsibility.'" Remember that all employees can detect insincerity, so be genuine in your efforts to engage them in a meaningful way. If they see that you care and demonstrate that their involvement is real, they, too, will care and be motivated to deliver excellence in safety.

In the next and final article of this series, I will cover Dr. Petersen's fifth and six criteria to safety excellence: system is flexible to accommodate the culture, and safety system is positively perceived by the workforce. I will also provide you with a series of questions, covering the Six Criteria to Safety Excellence, to help you assess your existing safety culture and identify opportunities for improvement. **AM**

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