Safety Accountability

Accountability. It's a powerful word, but in many businesses safety accountability has become an after-thought. In efforts to keep up with changing work environments, management often addresses its policy and procedure issues without developing sound safety accountability systems to ensure that the safety management efforts are effectively implemented, monitored, enforced, and updated.

Who in your organization is accountable for safety?

Total Management Commitment

The foundation to any process, policy, or cultural shift is built upon top management's total commitment to the change. Half-hearted commitment to a new direction will result in failure. Management must fully envision the positive results of any change; this will justify the resources needed to get the task completed properly.

Safety must be more than words on paper. If safety is perceived as something addressed separately from production, the safety process will fail. Safety must be integrated into operations in such a way that it is brought up on a daily basis, not as a gimmick. Top-level meetings should include discussions on the safety performance of each department and what is being done to control the costs associated with losses. Holding management, supervisors, and employees accountable for carrying out the safety activities will demonstrate the company's commitment to safe operations.

Performance Evaluations

Measuring compliance and rewarding employees for their active roles in safety is significant in the development of a safety accountability system. Performance evaluations should include a section on assessing an employee's efforts to create a safe work area. An employee's efforts to meet or exceed the company's safety goals should be reflected in their review. Throwing money at safety through incentive programs can have some effect, but rolling safety into the overall evaluation has more impact when management creates objectives for employee safety compliance. The objectives must be measurable; and must coincide with the overall efforts of the safety program.

Individual employees and supervisors must also be "sold" on the importance of the safety objectives and it is important they be given the resources necessary to meet the goals. Aside from corporate objectives, supervisors and employees should be encouraged to develop their own personal safety objectives. This kind of participation is critical to the development of a strong safety culture. Corporate and personal safety objectives send the message to the employee that safety is as important as timeliness, quality, quality of work, and other factors associated with performance evaluations.
New Employee Orientations

New employee orientation should devote significant time to training the employee to do the job right. How employees perceive their new employer has a lasting effect on their disposition, morale, safety attitude and productivity.

With statistics showing the majority of accidents occur in the first six months of employment, it is apparent that most companies do not provide adequate time to orient new employees in policies, procedures and safety. Developing accountability measures for orientation will yield returns on the quality time spent on a new employee's safety development.

Supervisors, managers, safety coordinators, human resources directors, and top management need to ensure that key safety policies and procedures are addressed to new workers. If done poorly or not at all, the effects will be felt in employee morale, turnover, and accidents. Although orientation elements vary somewhat from task to task, there will always be a set of safety elements basic to each job. The process should also involve one-on-one observations and communication by the new employee's supervisor.

Using other employees as mentors can also help in the orientation process. Chosen by the supervisor, the mentor can help the new employee with real-world problems and solutions. It is important that the mentor be trained and skilled in the communication of safe operations. The work place is too often filled with employees willing to show a new employee shortcuts that can be unsafe. The mentor must understand their role in the safety training of the new employee and be held accountable.

One-on-One Communication

Employees often complain to each other about hazardous conditions while never informing anyone with authority. Supervisors need to look to their employees for assistance in identifying problems that may lead to morale problems, safety hazards, and slow production.

Communication between the employee and supervisor should involve safety on a daily basis. A supervisor's visibility and willingness to communicate with his employees can help break down any perceived communication barriers. Daily safety observations and informal, one-on-one safety discussions can drive home the company's commitment to safety.

Expecting to reflect real safety commitment in formal safety meetings and written safety programs has been a common mistake. Employees reject canned safety meetings as insincere attempts to show the importance of safety. Written safety programs are dry, lifeless documents unless the policies are enforced actively and involve the employees regularly. A true commitment to safety is best reflected in the daily actions of the managers, supervisors and employees.
Supervision Is the Key

Whatever ideas top management comes up with it, is the supervisor who has to see that it gets done. This is no different with the creation of a safety accountability system. Most supervisors will do what is asked of them. But whether they do as asked depends on how they are approached with any new directive. Will they comply just until management stops looking? Are they doing it out of fear or because they believe in the safety plan? The importance of good communication between top management and the supervisors cannot be overestimated.

Whatever vision the company wants to present is spoken through the mouthpiece of the supervisor. If the supervisor does not believe in the safety plan, how will it be communicated effectively to the other employees? It is important that any directives planned be first presented to the supervisors to get their "buy-in." At that time, any misinterpretations or any objections can be addressed. The supervisors may be able to carry out the intent of the safety plan in a different, more acceptable way that is a win-win for all parties. The role of supervisors in safety leadership is obvious. They are the liaison between management’s mission and the employees’ ability to follow through in accomplishing it.

Employee Involvement

To create the best possible safety culture, it is best to get as many employees actively involved with the safety process as possible. It must be evident that every employee is responsible for safety and accountable for complying with the company safety goals. Promoting safety within the organization also relieves supervisors of some of the responsibility of the safety tasks and holds employees accountable for some of the safety activities, thus giving them some ownership in the safety process.

The delegation of safety tasks will open communication between the employees and the supervisors. This leads to trust between them—one of the hardest things to accomplish in the workplace. As each party begins to rely on the other, a trust will develop and it will create a culture where employees look out for one another. Trust is the common thread through any relationship, and a work relationship is no different.

When employees feel free to report accidents, hazards, or personal problems without fear of retaliation, the safety process will become increasingly more proactive. Any concerns they have should be addressed quickly and systematically. Get the employee's input whenever possible. Accident investigations, for example, are often seen as an opportunity to place blame. These activities should be seen as problem solving, not name-calling. Since the employee has seen that the investigation is being done for a positive purpose, they are more apt to give additional information to help reduce the potential for recurrence.
Conclusion

An active safety accountability system contributes to an effective work environment resulting in improved productivity, higher morale and quality performance. Safety accountability is achieved by total management commitment, active safety supervision, employee involvement, safety performance evaluations, new employee orientation, and effective communication.

Who is accountable for safety in your organization? The obvious answer - everyone!