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Safety in the Workplace: Be Rigorous, Not Ruthless

By Carl Potter



You may have read the book *Good to Great*, by Jim Collins. In his book he explains how many companies thought being good is... well, "good enough." In these times of constant change and global competition, it is important to always look for improvement --especially when it comes to safety.

Who wants to settle for "good enough" safety? In most cases, good means the company is willing to settle for an injury. "Good enough" safety means setting safety goals based on lagging indicators. (An example is to reduce lost time injuries by 10%.) Great safety means setting a rigorous goal of zero injuries. According to Collins, you want to be rigorous and not ruthless when growing your company. This same concept should also apply to safety in the workplace.

Is Your Safety Process Rigorous or Just Plain Ruthless?

Ruthless safety could be characterized as a company that tends to punish employees by verbally beating them over the head with the safety manual for getting hurt on the job. Don't read this wrong...every company must have a disciplinary policy to get the attention of employees who don't understand the consequences of unsafe behavior. But to truly change behavior frontline leaders must always clearly identify the behavior required to prevent injuries. After all, the goal is "Nobody Gets Hurt."

Rigorous safety could be characterized as clearly defined behaviors that workers are held accountable for that prevent known hazards from injuring them. If a worker continually proves that he or she has no intention of behaving safely, then disciplinary action must be taken. Rigorous safety means that leadership has the best interest of the employee at heart.

5 Factors for Rigorous Safety Leadership

Leading employees to behave safely on the job is not an easy task. During our 15 years of experience of consulting with top executives on workplace safety, we have had many leaders tell us that if they had known leading employees to behave safely on the job was so hard to do, they might have turned down the position of supervisor, foreman or lead. Yet, there is hope.

Leaders from the frontline can be effective by learning about dealing with these five human factors:

1. Expectations:

Unspoken, unrecognized expectations in the workplace can lead to job frustration, substandard safety performance, decreased job safety commitment and even high turnover. Understand that most employees expect to have a workplace free of hazards. Workers have varying expectations when it comes to factors such as autonomy, work/life balance, career opportunities, stability, structure, and teamwork. The key is to learn what expectations the individuals in your organization have and then work with them to meet or, in some cases, adjust those expectations.

2. Communication:

Being a superb safety communicator is difficult to accomplish. Think about the people to whom you communicate safety requirements on a daily basis. You will notice some are strong in certain communication skills, but weak in other skills. Learn everything you can about your communications style and how it affects others – what impact do you have? If you don't usually get a positive reaction from those around you, take a course in interpersonal skills.

3. Innovation:

Change, whether anticipated or unanticipated, can be difficult. To innovate, grow and improve a safety culture requires individuals who are able to see the big picture. Accept that change is a part of life and learn let go of the past and embrace and apply new techniques, technologies, and tools when appropriate.

4. Organization:

Safety innovation cannot be done without teams of people dedicated to hitting the goal: A Zero-Injury Workplace. Leaders must be able to organize a team and motivate it towards the goal. Imagine everyone leading each other to the goal of a zero-injury workplace.

5. Appreciation:

Great leaders accomplish great things. Great leaders appreciate the people who make things happen. Understanding how one reacts to certain situations as a leader is vital to being a successful leader.

Get Rigorous for a Bright Future

Becoming rigorous about safety is hard work, but it is rewarding. When a company and its leaders commit to improving their effectiveness with rigorous safety programs, employees are more motivated to behave safely so they can go home to their families every day without injury. After all, no matter what level you are in the company, the goal is “Nobody Gets Hurt.” That’s a goal everyone can live with.

About the author:

Carl Potter, CSP, CMC and Deb Potter, PhD, CMC helps top executives target a zero-injury workplace so everyone can go home to their families every day without injury. As advocates of a zero-injury workplace, they can help your organization raise its safety performance and cut its workers compensation insurance expenses in half. For more info about their Simply Seamless Safety® Leadership Development Process go to <http://www.simplyseamlessafety.com/>

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