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Creating a Culture of Safety Engagement

Engagement might just be the holy grail of safety. Here's how you can **define and build engagement** at your organization.

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For organizations that have mastered the basics and have a more mature safety culture, engagement is an essential ingredient for further improvement. Such organizations have typically made progress by developing sophisticated safety management systems that address all aspects of safety, including process safety, and by capitalizing on new technologies. However, even the best tools, processes, and technologies are only effective if they are used properly. If employees pencil whip checklists, shortcut processes, or bypass technology, then organizations are not reaping the full benefit of their safety programs. Ensuring employees at all levels fully engage with tools, processes, and technologies will lead to a step change in safety performance. So, how do organizations capture this holy grail? How do they engage everyone in safety?

Defining Engagement

The first step to improving anything is to define it. While there are many definitions of engagement, it is helpful to look at engagement behaviorally. Engaged employees do some unique behaviors that others don't do at all, but engagement is more often

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a matter of degrees (e.g., the quality of a safety conversation, the depth of a hazard assessment, and the tenacity of follow-through on safety improvements). By focusing on what engaged employees do differently, it is easier to develop strategies to get more of it. The following are examples of some of the behaviors that are characteristic of engaged employees at different levels of organizations.

Frontline Employees

Participate in safety discussions. Engaged employees actively participate in all discussions about safety and share their perspective. No one knows the challenges of performing the work safely better than the people who perform the work. Therefore, it is important that frontline employees talk about what gets in their way.

Actively work to keep peers safe. Engaged employees watch out for each other. It is clear that frequent observation and feedback are an essential part of minimizing incidents. Realistically, leaders do not have the time to do enough observations and provide enough feedback to ensure consistent safe behavior. When frontline employees actively participate in peer feedback, safe habits are built and sustained.

Report hazards. Engaged employees report hazards. Not just the physical hazards (e.g., an old piece of equipment that shows signs of failure) but behavioral and procedural hazards as well (e.g., decisions that have resulted in unanticipated risks or procedure changes that are causing dangerous shortcuts). Hearing about hazards and problems before they become incidents allows for truly preventive safety management.

Report near misses. Engaged employees report near misses. Near misses provide rare opportunities to learn and improve. Truly engaged employees go beyond "softball" events like close encounters with a wasps' nest and paper cuts. Any event that could have resulted in injury, illness, or damage is seen as a learning opportunity and is reported.

Frontline Supervisors

Carefully plan jobs. Engaged supervisors plan work with safety at the forefront. They go beyond planning for optimal productivity and efficiency and consider such factors as, which workers to pair up to ensure safe completion of work, the potential for fatigue, and workers' fitness for duty.

Conduct thorough preshift meetings. Engaged supervisors ensure meetings have a relevant safety focus. Rather than reading canned safety messages, they do a deep dive into safety issues important for the day's work. Engaged supervisors also get workers to participate, ensuring their expertise and perspective are represented.

Balance safety and productivity. Engaged supervisors talk about safety as much as productivity. They understand that in order to send a clear message about the importance of safety, they need to talk about, ask about, and provide feedback on safety, just as often as they do for productivity.

Managers

Coach supervisors frequently and proactively. Engaged managers coach their direct reports specifically around managing safety. They know that in order for safety leadership to improve there must be accountability for improvement, just as there is for other key performance areas. They also understand that everyone needs coaching to improve and so they actively work with direct reports to develop skills over time.

Demonstrate commitment to safety through actions, not just with words. A manager's actions speak louder than words. Engaged managers understand that it isn't enough to say, "Safety is number 1." They spend time talking to employees about safety, frequently asking employees how safety can be improved, and then following up on safety action items.

Consider safety in every decision. Engaged managers constantly think about safety. They understand that any decision they make could have implications for safety, so they think through how their decisions will play out at the front line. They realize that changes designed to improve other business objectives can sometimes encourage at-risk behavior, and they follow up to evaluate the impact of their decisions over time.

Engagement Is Discretionary

Pinpointing what engagement looks like is an important first step and a worthwhile exercise for every organization. By identifying engagement behaviors, organizations are creating a road map for culture improvement. In addition, clearly defining desired behaviors helps leaders see that engagement is not possible when using the outdated, compliance-focused management strategies that most leaders use. Why? Because most engagement behaviors are *discretionary,* that is, they are not requirements of the job, they are activities employees can choose to do—or not do.

For example, holding preshift meetings is typically a requirement of a supervisory job. However, there are things supervisors can do to improve the quality of those meetings that are typically not a requirement of the job. Things such as careful planning of the meetings to ensure specific discussions about safety issues relevant to the tasks of the day, having a conversation about potential changing conditions that might impact safety, and working to get crew members actively participating in the meetings. The supervisor who does these things sets up the crew for a much safer day. The supervisor who does not—who just goes through the motions—still gets paid. The level of engagement most organizations seek is truly discretionary—it goes above and beyond basic job requirements.

Building Engagement Is the Job of Leaders

When people talk about engagement, they often talk as though engagement is something employees should bring to the job. For example, supervisors are often heard saying, "The workers just don't seem to care—they are just not engaged in safety," as if to imply they should bring engagement with them to work along with their safety gloves and hard hats.

The truth is that engagement is a function of safety management practices. What leaders do and do not do either encourages or discourages engagement, *whether they are aware of it or not*. Unfortunately, many safety management practices actually discourage engagement. Why? Because leaders tend to focus on the negative. They manage safety by exception; focusing on what went wrong, problems, errors, violations of procedures, and at-risk behavior. Today's work environments are busy so only paying attention to exceptions seems like an efficient way to manage. The problem is that if you look for errors, violations, and at-risk behavior, then not surprisingly, that is what you will see. Furthermore, what you see will determine how you respond. A focus on errors, violations, and at-risk behaviors leads to the use of corrective feedback at best, and more negative consequences (like discipline), at worst. Ask many frontline employees about their interactions with leaders around safety and they will say, "The only time I hear from management is when I have done something wrong." It is no wonder they aren't more engaged in safety. The same is true for supervisors and managers. They only hear about safety when something is wrong.[1]

The science of behavior shows that over time, an overreliance on negative consequences leads to undesirable side effects, most notably, undermining engagement. While you cannot ignore at-risk behaviors, what you attend to most sets in motion management practices that can be productive or destructive over the long run. Thus, a big part of creating more engagement is using a higher ratio of positive consequences so that employees at all levels know their safety efforts are valued, and they will have a more positive experience around safety. But there is more to it than that.

Six Tips for Building Engagement

The following six management practices help to foster engagement and enhance safety performance.

> "By focusing on **WHAT ENGAGED EMPLOYEES DO DIFFERENTLY,** it is easier to develop strategies to get more of it."

1. **Build relationships.** Relationships are important in all aspects of life and business, and they are particularly important in safety. Building relationships starts with treating direct reports like people, not just like employees. Leaders must demonstrate they truly care about their direct reports, and in particular, about their health and safety. Next, leaders need to ask more and tell less. By *asking* more than *telling*, leaders learn more about direct reports, invite engagement directly, and leave employees feeling valued and respected. Finally, leaders must work to build and maintain trust.

   Trust is a key ingredient for engagement. Engagement is risky business for frontline employees. Reporting a near miss, giving constructive feedback to a peer, stopping a job because it isn't safe—these are risky. Not the kind of risk that might lead to injuries but the kind that might lead to other negative consequences such as getting in trouble, getting flak from peers, getting a reputation for being difficult, not getting promoted, etc. Most of us take risks only when we trust the people we are taking a risk for or with. We must trust that they understand our good intentions; we must trust that they won't react negatively; and we must trust that they won't use our words or actions against us. Building trust is not easy, but the recipe for trust is simple. We trust people who do what they say they will do. Leaders must be vigilant about this, no matter how small the behavior. Trust is built every time a leader does what he or she says he or she will do. Trust is eroded every time a leader fails to do that.

2. **Relentlessly address hazards.** It is impossible to have the safest work environment if hazards aren't reported and remediated. Hazard remediation relies on frontline employees to identify and report hazards and on management to fix them. Too often employees' perception is that hazards aren't addressed, or solutions come too slowly. Whether or not this is accurate is irrelevant. If employees think management isn't taking care of hazards, they will not be engaged. Why? Because frontline employees gauge how truly important safety is in an organization by management's willingness to invest in keeping the workplace as free of hazards as possible. Hazard remediation is the litmus test of management support for safety. A key to building engagement is to be proactive around hazard remediation.

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[1] *The fact that most organizations measure safety only with lagging indicators contributes significantly to the negative management focus. For more on this, see the article* Proactive Accountability for Safety.

MANUAL, INEFFICIENT OR DISPARATE SYSTEMS IMPACT **NOT ONLY YOUR EMPLOYEES**

BUT ALSO YOUR

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SOFTWARE CAN TURN YOUR EHS PROCESSES INTO A **COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE!**

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3. **Conduct daily safety interactions.** Interacting frequently with those who do the work is an essential part of building engagement. Such interactions provide opportunities to ask questions, to learn about hazards, to address concerns, and importantly, to positively reinforce. Unfortunately, too often leaders only initiate safety interactions when there are problems. This sets the stage for leaders to have largely negative interactions. While these are a necessary part of the job, successful leaders initiate safety interactions when things are going well, just as often (if not more often).

Leaders should go out looking for desired behaviors—looking to catch people doing things right. This increases opportunities to positively reinforce the desired safety behaviors. When observing at-risk behavior, start with the assumption that the worker was trying to do a good job, and from there ask questions to understand why a good worker made an unsafe choice.

4. **Use more positive reinforcement.** When leaders change their focus to what people are doing well and purposefully recognizing the behaviors they want more of, they strengthen those behaviors, and at the same time build relationships, trust, and engagement. We are all more likely to become engaged with something for which we experience positive consequences. Below are some tips for making positive reinforcement most effective.

- *Be specific.* Vague statements like "good job" don't lead to improvement. Pinpointing the specific safe behaviors and safety leadership behaviors ensures that those behaviors get strengthened.
- *Be sincere.* Everyone can see through disingenuous attempts at reinforcement, so sincerity is essential.
- *Individualize it.* Reinforcement is not a one-size-fits-all proposition. What works for one person may not work for the next.
- *Deliver immediately.* The more immediate the reinforcement is the more effective it is. Catch people in the act and reinforce.

5. **Respond positively to reporting.** While hearing about incidents, near misses, and at-risk behavior is not a positive experience, shooting the messenger only reduces reporting and gives leaders a false sense of how safe the workplace is. Undesirable safety events provide insight into how safety is really working, as opposed to how we think it is working. They uncover weaknesses in safety systems and processes that, in turn, enable changes to be made to prevent future incidents.

However, most leaders inadvertently discourage reporting of minor incidents and near misses by how they react. Signs of frustration, disbelief, or anger are only the start. Reporting often leads to unpleasant paperwork, investigations that feel like inquisitions, and sometimes, discipline for those who report. While these situations can be complicated, management reaction to the reporting of such events should be some form of "… thanks for telling me, let's figure out how to prevent this from happening again." To be clear, this isn't about positive reinforcement for incidents, near misses, or unsafe actions. It is positive reinforcement for the honest reporting of those events.

6. **Focus on prevention.** While most organizations still hold leaders accountable for lagging safety metrics, it is most productive to actively manage behaviors that prevent incidents—not just react when incidents occur. When leaders change their focus to preventive behaviors and change their strategy to positively reinforcing the safe behaviors and safety leadership behaviors they want more of, those behaviors are strengthened. At the same time, leaders are building relationships, trust, morale, and engagement.

> "What leaders do and do not do either **ENCOURAGES OR DISCOURAGES ENGAGEMENT,** whether they are aware of it or not."

Earning Safety Engagement Through Science

Safety is perhaps the only business objective that employees at all levels can agree upon. Everyone wants all employees to come to work and go home in the same condition. Given this rare concurrence, it is ironic that organizations struggle with safety engagement. Unfortunately, outdated management strategies unknowingly undermine engagement. A scientific approach to behavior provides solutions that help us change the way we manage safety, build engagement, and ultimately create a safety culture in which leaders and all employees' behavior around safety matches their values about safety.

Read more in *A Supervisor's Guide to Safety Leadership* by Judy Agnew (Performance Management Publications, 2016). **SD**

Judy Agnew, PhD, is a recognized thought leader, presenter, and author of three highly regarded safety books, including Safe by Accident? (with Aubrey Daniels) and A Supervisor's Guide to Safety Leadership. As Senior Vice President of Safety Solutions at Aubrey Daniels International (ADI), Judy helps organizations use behavioral science to improve safety performance.