

Employee Attitudes--A Must Have

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Like everyone, you're probably looking to reduce workplace injuries, and you think a safety program focusing on attitude may be your ticket to injury-free employees. You may very well be right. But you may be surprised to find that the journey toward an injury-free workplace may be just as important as the final outcome.

It wasn't long ago that your journey may have taken you to a behavior-based safety program that was the rage in safety. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that the keyword in behavior-based safety is behavior. What effects behavior? Recalling the ABC model of behavior-based safety, there is an Antecedent, a Behavior, and a Consequence. But what exactly does this mean? Let's look at a few examples.

Cathy, who's worked at the same automobile assembly plant for the last 15 years, has a part jammed in the press--the antecedent. Instead of going through the proper process to shut down the machine, she decides to quickly reach in and pull it out--the behavior--only to have her arm pinned--the consequence.

Or, let's take Robert, who steps over an extension cord lying on the floor. His co-worker, Brian, who's carrying a ladder, doesn't see the cord and trips only a few minutes later.

Examining Employee Behavior

Employee behavior is arguably one of the greatest determinants in workplace safety, especially as employees interact amid a host of varying safety issues. Their behavior plays a significant role in workplace safety and injury prevention. While this concept is relatively easy to understand, the harder question is figuring out what determines behavior.

In 2001, 3.9 million people were injured on the job--more than the populations of North Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, and Nebraska combined.

Every person's behavior is unique, and even one particular person's behavior can change from day to day. What, then, accounts for the change? Attitude. Employees harbor a host of different workplace attitudes each day. After 15 years on the job and no injuries, Cathy probably thought a workplace injury couldn't happen to her. Robert saw the cord and thought to step over it. Since safety wasn't his job, he was going to leave picking it up to the next guy. Neither one considered any of the consequences.

These situations are not unique. In fact, 80 percent of workplace injuries are caused by unsafe acts, while only 20 percent are caused by unsafe conditions. Employers deduce that if they do a good job reminding their employees of workplace hazards and make sure all machines are functioning properly, workplace injuries will be eliminated.

Unfortunately, it's not that easy. Employees don't seem to have caught on to the importance of their attitude keeping them safe at work. A recent national study conducted by Missouri Employers Mutual Insurance (MEM) showed that 64 percent of Americans don't think a workplace injury will happen to them, and nearly 70 percent say they think about themselves or a loved one getting injured on the job only a few times a year or less.

But we know 3.9 million people--more than the populations of North Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, and Nebraska combined--were injured on the job in 2001, excluding injuries from Sept. 11. So why do employees think an injury won't happen to them?

Understanding and Changing Attitudes

Attitude is key to understanding employee behavior and preventing on-the-job injuries. Before any safety program can be instituted, however, employees must understand that a workplace injury is possible and it can happen to them. For this sort of attitudinal change to happen to every employee, the organization must undergo a cultural change that starts at the top and filter its way down to all employees.

Central to this culture is the feeling that safety is a top priority and nothing--including quotas, deadlines, or orders--is more important than employee welfare. In our previous

examples, Cathy must be allowed to feel like the few minutes she would lose shutting down the jammed machine is far less important than even the chance of a workplace injury. If Robert thought he might get a pat on the back for taking responsibility for picking up the extension cord, he may be more inclined to think about the next guy.

Safety also must be considered a team goal. Results from MEM's attitude study show that 95 percent of employees think their employers are responsible for creating safe environments for employees. But with supervisors caught between multiple tasks, employees also must take a proactive role in ensuring not only their own safety, but their co-workers' safety, as well.

Fostering this sort of safety culture doesn't happen overnight. Rather, this transformation happens slowly so that all employees embrace safety, buy into the process, and accept their new safety responsibilities so they feel like they are making a difference in the company. Employee responsibility and ownership for safety throughout an organization is critical to creating a safe environment. Once this mile marker is reached, the company is well on its way to an effective safety program.

Attitude to the Rescue

Next on your journey is realizing that employees do have attitudes. The key is to ensure that safety programs emphasize proper attitudes so the behavior is positive and the consequences safe. To aid in this, companies with an already intact safety culture can consider monitoring behavior through peer observations, data analysis, or surveys (or hopefully all three). This approach will help determine where, if any, breakdowns occur.

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For example, did the press jamming cause the injury, or was it Cathy deciding to put her arm in the machine? Did the extension cord accidentally fall on the floor, or did an employee make an unwise decision by putting it there? The answers to these questions

will help companies determine if mechanical issues are to blame for injuries, or whether the cultural changes they've implemented haven't taken as deep a root as they hoped.

This isn't to say, though, that even with the most firm safety commitment in place at an organization, employees won't make poor safety decisions from time to time. It's at these times that we need to rely on the other effective components of the safety program, especially safety coordinators and committees, training and outside safety professionals.

Safety coordinators and safety committees can have a profound impact on keeping employee morale high. They can hold regular meetings to discuss safety issues and give employees yet another voice in ensuring safety. They also can work to continually motivate employees toward safety by posting safety signs, implementing safety suggestion boxes, and being a sounding board for concerns.

Training also is critical. Employees, especially long-term employees, often become blasé about their jobs or think they simply have nothing more to learn. Training is motivation to continually excel in that position, and serves as a reminder that no amount of time on the job keeps employees immune from an injury.

The role of outside safety professionals can't be overlooked, either. Trained in accomplishing safety goals without sacrificing the product's quality or quantity, safety professionals can be a valuable resource because they can understand a company's unique perspective. These professionals can bring new and fresh ideas unique to an organization, serve as a visible reminder of safety's importance, and continually motivate employees toward safety.

It goes without saying that the goal of any safety program is injury-free employees who return home safely each night to their families. The road to getting there may be lengthy for some employers, especially if they have to start by re-evaluating their culture to see if it actively promotes workplace safety. But once employees feel like they are an active part in the process and aren't just along for the ride, companies are sure to be on the

right road to the right attitude. With a firm top-down safety commitment acting as the map and employees' attitude and behavior as the compass to guide safety efforts, workplace safety will be right around the corner.