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Fully Engaging Employees to Create a Safety Partnership

Dominic Cooper, B-Safe Management Solutions Inc.

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Abstract

The creation of a genuine safety partnership between employees and management is essential to achieve excellence in safety, but is easier said than done. Creating a safety partnership means management and the workforce jointly working toward achieving common and understood safety goals, with clear and consistent communication, efficient monitoring and reporting, and decisive action to investigate blockages and taking the appropriate corrective action as needed.

Changing a Safety Culture requires to wean employees off of any dependence on management for safety and leaders need to recognize that safety is a social activity where everyone has to work together as a TEAM (Together Everyone Achieves More!). To move from a traditional ‘command and control’ model of safety to an ‘all-inclusive’ one, is challenging, and requires a consistency of purpose, focus, and execution from all concerned.

The key drivers for developing and maintaining a safety partnership are straightforward and surround [a] management’s commitment to safety and high levels of support and [b] reducing the degree of risk presented by the nature of the work. High managerial support leads to higher levels of engagement, which in turn lead to much higher compliance with safety rules and procedures. Moreover, reducing high levels of risk presented by hazards and high job-pressures can also lead to much higher compliance with safety.

The benefits of fully engaging employees in a safety partnership are enormous. For example, engaged employees are much less likely to be involved in an incident, and even those who are, tend to experience less severe outcomes than those not engaged in safety.

Keywords: Employee Engagement, Safety Partnership, Safety Leadership Skills, Managerial Practices, Cultural Norms

Introduction

Employee engagement is an organizational approach designed to help ensure employee commitment to an entity’s goals and values, while motivating people to contribute to that entity’s success. Such entities tend to possess a strong and genuine value for workforce involvement, with clear evidence of a ‘just and fair’ culture (Reason, 1997) based on mutual respect between the entire management structure and the workforce. The key aspect is ensuring an understanding by all concerned that engagement is two-way to decide on the best way forward and act together to make it happen: managers deliberately reach out to engage with employees to focus on issues of importance (e.g. safety), who in turn proactively and positively engage with management. In sum this means creating a genuine partnership between management and the workforce to improve performance in a specified domain.

From a business entity's perspective, it is important to recognize that employee engagement is measurable and can be correlated with performance. Studies have shown that [a] where employee engagement was low, those companies had 62% more safety incidents (Harter et al, 2006), and [b] engaged employees were *five times less likely* to experience a safety incident, and *seven times less likely to have a lost-time* safety incident (Lockwood, 2007) than non-engaged employees. Similarly, the more employees are engaged in enhancing the reliability of plant and equipment, the lower the maintenance costs are, with correspondingly lower incident rates (Reliability Center, 2009). Thus the economic argument for employee engagement in safety is beyond dispute.

Creating a safety partnership

A safety partnership is defined as:

"Leadership, managers and front-line associates jointly focusing on safety and proactively working together in a business entity to minimize the possibility of harm and maximize safety performance".

Creating a genuine safety partnership, therefore, means management and the workforce jointly working toward achieving common and understood safety goals, with clear and consistent communication, efficient monitoring and reporting, and decisive action to investigate blockages and taking the appropriate corrective action as needed. Neither management nor employees can bring about good safety performance on their own. Management, for example, relies on their employees to report potential or actual incidents, follow procedures, work safely, etc. Similarly, employees cannot improve safety on their own. They rely on management, for example, to set the direction for action, develop supporting safety policies, develop appropriate procedures, release the necessary resources to enact the policies, and complete any corrective actions, etc. As such, both managers and employees must recognize that safety is a social activity where everyone has to work together as a team (Cooper & Finley, 2013). Moving from a traditional 'command and control' model of safety to one where safety is done *with* people, not *at* people is challenging, and takes a consistency of purpose, focus, and execution from all concerned (Cooper, 2008).

Key Drivers for delivering a safety partnership

The key drivers for developing and maintaining a safety partnership are straightforward and surround [a] management's commitment to safety and high levels of support (Cooper, 1998) and [b] reducing the degree of risk presented by the nature of the work (Nahrgang et al, 2011). High managerial support leads to higher levels of engagement, which in turn lead to much higher compliance with safety rules and procedures (Cooper, 2010). Moreover, reducing high levels of risk presented by hazards and high job-pressures can also lead to much higher compliance with safety.

Specific areas of safety that joint management and workforce teams can use to develop a proactive safety partnership include: [a] Safety Leadership skills development; [b] Reporting, investigating & reviewing incidents; [c] Hazard identification exercises; [d] Risk assessments; [e] Reviews of rules and procedures; [f] Development of toolbox talks; and [g] Pro-active involvement in behavioral safety processes.

Developing everyone's Safety Leadership skills

The evidence from public enquiries into safety disasters shows that ineffective safety leadership often stems from people not knowing what their company's safety management systems look like. In turn they are unclear about their individual safety responsibilities and obligations, and what they are to be held accountable for, and their authority over safety. This can be fixed relatively easily by developing a Safety Leadership Behavioral Competency and Accountability Matrix for all managerial levels that focuses on their visible, demonstrable safety leadership (Cooper & Finley, 2013). Once achieved, it is a simple matter of developing behavioral leadership checklists of specific behaviors focused on ten things that every manager can do, recording these on a weekly basis, and tracking

these through an electronic database, and providing regular feedback on overall performance to the senior management team (Cooper, 2010).

A key leadership competence is effective communication to achieve behavior change. Not everyone is as good at communicating with others as they could be. It takes training and practice, and sometimes courage, to speak *with* people in a two-way dialogue that puts them at their ease so they feel comfortable releasing vital information that can uncover any problems (i.e. precursors) that could lead to harm. Increasing the number of communications between a safety leaders and direct reports is an opportunity to communicate the entity's value for safety, establish close(r) working relationships with the workforce, and discover issues that could lead to harm. For example, research suggests that up to 87 percent of Serious Injuries and Fatalities (SIF's) can be identified via such conversations (Hale, 2002; Newell et al, 2012). In the O&G industry, safety observation and discussion processes are common. Given that anybody in an entity can be a 'safety leader', training in observation and communication skills could and should be extended to encompass an entity's entire roster of personnel, not just be restricted to those with line-management responsibilities, as is often the case.

Often, however, these observation/discussion processes fail to maximize their full benefits as the recording, analysis and provision of detailed feedback upon which to act for the benefit of all, is often limited in some way. Attending to these issues so that all of the entity's personnel can be provided with detailed feedback to focus corrective actions can significantly maximize their value, especially if they are used to identify and track potential SIF's.

Improving Incident Reporting, Investigation and Analysis

Many entity's safety efforts are based on the recording and monitoring of incident statistics, with great progress in incident reductions being made over the past decade or so in the industry. However, there are still opportunities to more fully involve people in the entire incident reporting and analysis process ranging from reinforcing incident reporting to identifying potential SIF's and their underlying contributors. It is known that non-fatal injuries are substantially under-reported by around 50 percent (Probst et al, 2008), which means those factors that could lead to an SIF cannot be identified. Socially rewarding the reporting of incidents (e.g. praising those who do) will help to overcome a lack of reporting of 'close-calls' and incidents that prevails in some quarters, while also helping to develop a genuine "safety partnership".

To further develop / cement the safety partnership, it is also a good idea to involve employees in incident investigations as often as is practicable, with the focus on helping to answer the principle questions of the Who, the What, the When, the Where, the How and the Why. This offers the advantage of obtaining the assistance of those most likely to know the 'unique ins and outs' of the incident causing situation that may escape others too far removed from daily operations.

Hazard Identification

Training people to identify potential hazards in their working environment and reporting them is a fundamental aspect of controlling safety. A hazard means '*anything, if left uncontrolled, which has the potential to cause injury, illness, or property damage*'. Although hazards can be permanent or temporary in nature, most are related to their capacity for a potential energy release (e.g. temperature, gravity, mechanical, electrical, etc.). As the workforce face such hazards on a daily basis, it makes sense to involve them in hazard identification and follow-up risk assessments. This helps them to more fully understand the hazardous nature of their working environment, while helping to identify key risks and appropriate solutions. The information obtained can be used in many ways, not least helping to improve safety training programs and associated Safe Operating Procedures (SOPs). A very simple, but effective, method to teach Hazard Identification is for the

workforce to regularly review anonymized reports of incidents that have caused harm, or had the potential to cause harm, in their workplace. In this way everyone becomes highly familiar with the actual types of activity and equipment that are causing problems.

Risk Assessment

Every job has some level of risk attached in some way, even office jobs. Risk refers to *'the possibility of harm or loss'* presented by the existence of *perceived threats* within a particular situation. Undertaking a systematic review of the risks associated with tasks, job methods, equipment, machinery, etc., is a good way to involve employees in the safety effort. Formal Risk Assessment (Job Safety Analysis) is a structured process whereby [1] perceived or actual risks are identified, assessed, and recorded; [2] the preventative risk control measures are documented; [3] the appropriate risk control methods are implemented; and [4] the effectiveness of the risk control measures are regularly monitored and reviewed. Because there are many different types of jobs, it can be difficult to know where to start. It is strongly recommended that priority should be given to [a] jobs with the highest injury or illness rates; [b] jobs in which one simple human error could lead to severe consequences; [c] jobs complex enough to require written safety instructions; and [d] jobs that are new to your operation or have undergone changes in processes and procedures. The results of the assessment should be peer reviewed by other employees, to ensure that all the risks presented by a hazard have been addressed and everyone is in agreement with the risk ratings, and the potential solutions. This again builds ownership and trust of the process, while creating and/or reinforcing the safety partnership.

Review Rules & Procedures

Studies have shown that non-compliance to rules and procedures can be a significant problem (Lawrence, 2005). In-depth examination revealed non-compliance was mostly related to: [a] rules seen as too complex, not 'real world', [b] rules seen as making the job less safe; [c] procedures not making sense; [d] procedures being too rigid, inflexible, or numerous; [e] procedures often being unavailable; [f] people just getting the job done; and [g] a lack of communication. Not just limited to employees, managers are also known to circumvent the administrative aspects of safety, or put productivity before safety. Consistent non-compliance to a company's rules and procedures signal that a review is required, as there must be something wrong with them. Such reviews provide a great opportunity to involve and engage people in safety, particularly as they will always know what the problems are. Importantly, those who are involved in such reviews are much more likely to follow the rules & procedures as they will have some degree of ownership of them.

Following research recommendations (Lawrence, 2005) it is suggested companies *"(do) not continue to produce more and more rules and regulations to cover every aspect of the business... aim to operate with fewer rules of the highest quality"*. Involve as many employees as possible to identify any unnecessary safety rules and procedures, so they can be eliminated or simplified to ensure the focus is on the safety critical aspects of a task. These safety critical aspects again can be identified by periodically examining an entity's previous incident reports.

Development of Toolbox Talks

Toolbox or Tailgate talks are short two-way safety discussions aimed at imparting safety knowledge about a particular topic (e.g. working at heights). The goal is to empower and educate people so that they can recognize, avoid, report, and correct any safety hazards, with mandatory attendance usually being the norm. As a general rule, successful and useful toolbox talks involve short two-way discussions relevant to that day's task, and are interesting. A simple way of reinforcing a safety partnership is for front-line managers and workers to jointly develop such talks and present these to their colleagues. In this way, the act of development helps people proactively identify hazards (or at

least reinforce their learning), and hear about typical injuries people have witnessed or heard about, so that the audience more fully appreciates the risk(s) involved.

Behavioral Safety Processes

Behavioral Safety processes are formal systems that are known to dramatically reduce incidents triggered by 'unsafe' behaviors. Modern Behavioral Safety processes use a dual approach, involving both the workforce and managers to help develop and reinforce a safety partnership.

Behavioral Safety Processes usually start by digging deeply into an entity's previous incident records to locate specific 'Unsafe' or 'At-risk' behaviors spinning out of potential incident pre-cursors, and placed on an observation checklist specific to a work area or task activity. In more recent times, work conducted on identifying potential SIF's, their pre-cursors, and particular exposure categories (e.g. dropped object) could and should be used. Once such behaviors have been identified, attempts are made to discover the triggers (e.g. unavailable equipment) driving these behaviors (e.g. using improvised tools), and what factors are maintaining them (e.g. getting the job done), so any appropriate corrective actions can be taken to reduce exposure. At the same time, to align managers with the Behavioral Safety Process so they provide support, managers are asked to identify ten safety leadership behaviors that they can do each and every week, that they are willing to track themselves against through an electronic database (Cooper, 2009a).

Executing the change strategy usually involves training people to observe their colleagues and give verbal feedback at the point of observation to reinforce safe behaviors or coach those behaving unsafely. This also includes an entity's management team who are asked to observe and hold discussions with those observed, twice a week. This makes it clear to all that the Behavioral Safety Process is a joint effort by management and employees to keep people and the facility safe. In turn this reinforces the safety partnership.

Some processes use the initial two weeks observation data to calculate an average score for a workgroup / location to provide a 'comparison point, and ask the workgroups to set their own 'improvement targets based on this. Thereafter, observations are collated and used to facilitate weekly feedback and group discussions, develop appropriate corrective actions (e.g. remove hazardous materials, etc.), and track ongoing progress. Data trends are used to adapt the process to suit the particular circumstances (e.g. shift the focus to other safety behaviors), every four-six months or so, to keep the process focused on current issues. Often, many people are trained to observe using a pre-determined observation card, with the data collated on a monthly basis by a steering committee, with the data being forwarded to 'focus groups' for action if a significant issue is identified. Each approach has its advantages and disadvantages (Cooper, 2009a), but meta-analytic research shows providing those being observed with four types of feedback (i.e. verbal at the point of observation, weekly graphical charts trending the data and displayed in work areas, a written weekly collated report that is discussed in workgroups/ crews) to be the key to success (Cooper, 2009b). Providing the facility's senior management team with a monthly update on overall performance of the metrics helps to keep them in the loop, which in turn makes it easier for them to provide the necessary ongoing support to sustain the process over the longer term.

Summary

Employee engagement is an important tool to use to help improve safety performance. The evidence shows engaged employees experience fewer injuries at less cost, help increase the reliability and efficiency of Assets while reducing injury rates, and are critical to help identify and manage the precursors of potential SIF's. This paper has offered practical ways to help Entities bring about a safety partnership between managers and the workforce

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Authors Bio

Dominic Cooper is CEO of B-Safe Management Solutions Inc.

A world-renowned BBS expert, Cooper is both a Business Psychologist and a Safety Professional who has implemented safety culture processes internationally for over 20 years. A past Professor at Indiana University - Bloomington, he has written 6 books and over 150 articles on Behavioral Safety, Safety Culture change, and Safety Leadership. In 1995 and 1997 he was the recipient of national awards from the Institute of Occupational Safety & Health for his writings on Behavioural Safety. In 1998, he published *Improving Safety Culture: a Practical Guide*. In 2009 he published '*Behavioral Safety: A Framework for Success*'. In 2013, with co-author Lucas Finley, he published the '*Strategic Safety Culture Roadmap*'.

Consistently achieving 40 – 75% reductions in companies' incident rates in Europe, Africa, the Middle East and the USA, Cooper was a member of the Corps of Engineers and a construction worker prior to university study. As the CEO of BSMS Inc., Cooper is actively engaged with clients, is a well-known speaker, and is a member of several professional organizations.

Cooper holds a BSc Psychology, from the University of East London, an MSc in Industrial Psychology from the University of Hull, and a Ph.D. in Organizational Psychology from the University of Manchester in the UK.