

# Management's Role in Changing Safety Culture

By Wayne Jensen

Industry has struggled for many years trying to figure out how to change the culture of their workers from working unsafe to a culture of working 100 percent safe. As a high-level manager or owner, the biggest thing you need to know is, "your people are working like they believe you want them to work!"

Look at that logic. People who want to keep their job so they can provide for their families believe they must please the ultimate person who is running the company. If they believe you are there only to make money, which is only possible when there is high productivity, they will also believe that safety is of secondary importance. You may be thinking, "I am on record stating that safety is number one." The fact is that you can say safety is number one as many times as you want and your people will still think you are saying that to keep OSHA or the insurance company off your back. They won't believe you mean it.

The primary reason employees believe the way they do is because of layers of management between you and your people. The worker with wrench in hand associates what you want by what his or her immediate supervisor wants. If their immediate supervisor focuses only on production because they too believe that is what you want, then that worker will only believe productivity is number one and safety follows behind and maybe not at the number two position. After all, you created the system. The people who are in place at all levels are there at your pleasure. They do what you want them to do and if they stop doing that they all believe they will get fired. That is just how it works.

How do you think your supervision, at all levels, is portraying you? Are they representing you well? Are they demonstrating your values about safety?

If you think that people just won't risk their lives for the sake of pleasing an owner or high level manager, you are right. The fact is that they will only do things that they believe they can do without injury. This does not mean they are following safety rules to prevent



injury. They will tend to break any safety rule they believe is unnecessary or that they have skill to break without getting hurt. No worker intentionally works unsafe believing that "today" is likely to be the day they will die! A worker may admit to "breaking a safety rule," but seldom to working unsafe. At least that is the story they tell their spouse.

CEOs and managers need to use this message: "Work Safe and Follow All Safety Rules." Many people don't equate working safe with following safety rules.

As an executive manager, try leading a meeting where the point of discussion is the value of working 100 percent safe. Something as simple as asking the question "What would be the value of working 100 percent safe at this company?" Listing the answers on a flip chart to involve everybody is powerful. Ultimately, you lead the process, but ask your people for the answers. It has to be their idea if you want the culture to change.

If you really want to prove to yourself that management is the hardest group to win over on safety culture, ask them the question: "If we begin telling our people today to work 100 percent safe which means follow all safety rules, what will happen to productivity?" The answer from managers and workers alike every time is "it will decrease."

The truth is that productivity always increases when people are required to work 100 percent safe. You will have the greatest life saving opportunity of your entire life if you will say to your people, "I don't care if production falls off, I want you to work 100 percent safe." If you prove to your people that you care so much about them that you are willing to sacrifice productivity or even the business if it will prevent even the slightest injury, they WILL provide you with productivity and success. The converse is also true.

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