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Sent: Wednesday, September 05, 2012 7:46 AM
To: Tom Wagner
Subject: September FOCUS



Focus

A publication of Wagner Consulting Group

September 2012

Hallmarks of an Effective Employee Safety Program

Safety Culture

Organizations with the most effective safety programs have built a safety-conscious culture that is based on management's commitment to fulfill a *social obligation* to keep employees safe. This commitment flows from a sincere desire to have each employee return home every day without injury. When managers put employee well-being first, they also benefit from lower costs: insurance premiums, OSHA fines, attorney fees, legal settlements, medical bills, employee turnover, lost productivity, and so on. In summary, doing the right thing for employees is also the best thing for the organization.

The best safety culture emphasizes positive reinforcement; fear-driven safety cultures are far less effective. Nevertheless, managers must occasionally discipline an employee for safety violations. The best supervision approach is "tough and caring." When employees sense supervisors and managers *care*, the no-nonsense tough part makes perfect sense.

Training Techniques

Safety training must be multi-dimensional nowadays to be effective because we have multiple generations in the workforce. That means an emphasis on video aids and hands-on experiences, and also includes a mix of classroom and on-site training. The most effective training occurs in a classroom setting and uses a multi-media format.

Recognition and Reinforcement

It's important to recognize that improving workplace safety involves changing people's attitudes and behaviors, and – let's face it – change is hard. That's why constant reinforcement is necessary to influence a person to *think and work smart*. To create lasting behavioral change (that is, the person does the right thing when no one is looking), you must use frequent repetition.

What doesn't work well in motivating safe work practices is cash or gift incentive programs. Here's why. There's a mental disconnect between preventing injury/death and cash/gifts; there's no equivalence and no relative balance. Avoiding personal injury *is its own reward*, and offering mere cash or prizes cheapens the real reason to work safely. In fact, many psychological studies have proven that paying people to do the right thing (like donating blood, for example) *reduces* the amount of the desired behavior. Once you understand this aspect of human behavior, you understand why safety incentive programs yield disappointing results.

That's not to say we should not celebrate safety milestones, or recognize people who consistently set a good example. We absolutely should! Recognition events, whether big and formal or short and intimate, lift people up and mark a moment in time when we carry out a shared celebration of accomplishment. We all need more of those moments.



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Working safely is its own reward.

Moreover, it reduces hard and soft costs.

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