Texas Council Risk Management Fund

Safety Leadership – A Lifelong Mindset

Growing up in South Texas, I didn't have much choice as to what my opinion about safety would be. My father worked for a gas pipeline, and he was a committed advocate for taking safety precautions. Whether it was doing yard work, working on the roof, digging post holes, or doing woodwork in the garage, we had a safety conversation before and during each project.

I didn't know or appreciate it at the time, but my father was showing me not just how to act safe, but to think safe. This was my first introduction to safety leadership and a safety mindset.

This is not at all meant to equate a supervisor/employee relationship as parent and child. Families have dynamics and so do companies and unless you are in a family-owned company, and you are in the family, they can be quite different. The idea is that I didn't know there was an option to acting safely. That's just the way it was.

When asked, most employees would say that safety is a priority, regardless of where they work. So why wouldn't people speak up or take action?

- It is just easier to go with the flow. They do not want to make waves
- That's the way we've always done it, and no one has been hurt
- Newer employees may not speak up if they feel they haven't been on the job as long as the others and maybe it is not really a problem
- Concern about ridicule or being called a teacher's pet etc.
- Fear of retaliation
- That's the manager's job, not mine
- I figure someone else will say something

Safety leadership is a concept in which the Center, Supervisors, Managers, and informal leaders don't just talk about safety—they demonstrate it. There needs to be a concerted, strategic effort to create a culture of safety. This will include a few, but important actions:

- There must be a strategic statement regarding safety communicated throughout the organization. There should be messaging that is consistent from the top levels to the front-line employees. Behavior changes many times begins in the language used which then becomes individual behavior. Questions to ask an employee asking about safety could include, "What would you do if I wasn't here to ask?" These questions can help you determine whether the person has the information or not. What does their gut tell them?

- Managers must walk the talk. It is not enough to talk about safety. Employees are always watching and if there is a perception that Managers have a separate set of rules employees can feel they have permission to do the same. An example could be

a supervisor who doesn't use PPE on a job because it is too far to walk to the storage area for a 30 second job. If an employee is later observed not using PPE for the same thing and gets called out by the supervisor, they can simply ask, "Why should I wear PPE? You don't."

- Constantly look for potential or actual hazards. Our Loss Control Consultants view the world through a prism of safety. You can't turn it off. Whether it is on the job, at home, or in the community they are always seeing safety hazards. This is the essence of a safety mindset. It is 24-7 and not limited to work.

- Listen to employees who identify a potential hazard. Someone who works in a job every day may have more knowledge than you. Don't simply dismiss this as whining or someone looking to avoid work. A manager I spoke with talked about several employees complaining about not enough light in their work area. The manager dismissed this as just another worker who will never be satisfied. When the Risk Manager got involved, it was determined that there was only about 57% of the recommended lighting needed for that area. Once corrected, production went up 12%. Quite a result coming from a complaint!

- Get to the root cause of the problem. Use a tool such as a fishbone diagram or a repetitive "why" sequence to get to the underlying problem. When you truly solve the root cause, the issue goes away without reappearing.

- Reward those who demonstrate safety on the job. Acknowledge their actions privately or publicly, depending on the person. Set achievable goals and call out good personal or team behavior. Let them know how you value not just production but safe production.

- Set challenging but not unattainable goals. People need to know they can meet or exceed the goal while being productive.

- Beware of conflicting goals that send the wrong message or cause people to choose such as a goal for safety that makes meeting a productivity goal unachievable or vice versa. Many employees choose the path of least resistance, and they shouldn't have to pick one over the other. Training and support can help them understand it is not either production or safety or vice versa.

- Be consistent with your response to people pointing out a concern with safety. Listen with intent even though you may believe the employee has other motivations. If you get loud, dismissive, or sarcastic with someone who identifies a problem, or listen without taking any action, it is less likely they will come back to you. Some of the worst issues I have seen are often widely known. People say they reported it, and nothing was done, or they have come to ignore or work around the issue.

- Coach employees to look for safety issues. Walk around with employees and challenge them to pick 3 potential problems. Identify others they may not see. Have

them list the equipment they need for a job and see if they include what PPE they need. Coach based on the answers they give. Questions are powerful tools.

- Measure your progress. Make it visible. Connect employee actions with results.

- Follow-up and communicate. This seems simple but it is the step many managers miss. Let employees know not just that you heard their issue(s) and what actions can be taken to remove the issue. Even if there isn't really a problem or the "fix" is cost prohibitive, give feedback. Involve them in the process up to the resolution. If you have a person who is constantly finding problems, consider them for a position on your safety committee.

Creating a safety mindset is part of building a culture of safety. People don't want to work in an environment that makes them feel expendable or unworthy of safety. Not everyone will grow up hearing and seeing safety in action. Not everyone will come to the job with a safety mindset. This is something you can teach and behavior which can be modified. The results of developing Safety Leadership pay off in employee satisfaction, reductions in injury, lower insurance costs and a reputation for taking care of your people. That is a positive result you can't always show on a balance sheet.

If you would like more information on Safety Leadership, contact Jeremy Wade, Risk Control Manager at Jeremy.wade@sedgwick.com.