A Culture of Safety Starts at the Top

We are all familiar with safety in our personal lives. We make our kids wear bicycle helmets, we look both ways before crossing the street, and we keep hairdryers out of the sink. But how often do we think about safety in our workplace, where we spend one-third of our adult lives? It turns out, we probably don’t think of it often enough. In a given year, an average of 3 million people in private industry faces some kind of injury as a result of their jobs. In many industries, injury costs can exceed profit in a given year. Most of these injuries can be avoided.

An organization has a responsibility to develop an environment in which safety is a foundational part of the culture. It must be upheld by everyone, from front line workers to the CEO. And it must start with senior management.

Committing to Safety. Senior management has a responsibility to establish a safety culture, which can be defined as the collective values, beliefs, attitudes, and norms that shape individual safety-related behaviors in an organization. This culture can flourish only if senior management is committed to improving safety, fostering the success of a safety program, and empowering everyone within the organization to be part of a solution. A culture of safety requires that everyone looks out for one another and encourages injury self-reporting without judgment or consequence. It’s about improving the culture and system as a whole to find the causal factors that led to those injuries or mistakes, not to place blame on individual actors.

Establishing a culture of safety and effective safety program requires an honest assessment of an organization’s risks. Transparency takes courage, but it is a crucial component in this process. In order to appropriately assess risk, a health and safety team should direct all workplace health and safety initiatives. It also can be useful for companies to engage third-party workplace health and safety providers. Many assessment, evaluation, and survey tools are available to ensure that decision-driving safety information reaches senior management. While such tools can be quite valuable, potential underlying issues within a company’s internal processes must be addressed. A culture of safety works most effectively only when it complements an already solid foundation of internal policies and procedures.

Investing in a Culture of Safety. Senior management must commit to investing time and resources into developing an appropriate culture. There are several ways to invest in safety. Ensuring safe facilities is one key—and obvious—measure. Creating systems to track and prevent safety concerns is another. These systems can be technological, such as an incident management system. They also can be infrastructural, such as simple mechanisms for employees to voice safety concerns and suggestions without fear of reprisal. Regardless of what form they take, these systems must engage employees in the safety of their environments and offer them ways to proactively improve it.
One of the most important ways to invest in employees is through ongoing training opportunities. A learning-centered approach transforms knowledge from training into action that drives bottom-line safety results, including risk reduction and injury/illness/loss prevention. From an employer’s perspective, training can be viewed as necessary, but costly. However, data show that it is, indeed, better to be safe than sorry.

**Implementing a Culture of Safety.** Another critical step in implementing a culture of safety is developing, enforcing and committing to a robust workplace health and safety program. The success of a safety program correlates with the level of accountability that exists in an organization. Accountability starts at the top, and requires clear communication and the capacity to monitor behaviors and measure results. Top technology solutions support accountability measures with automated scheduling and notifications, scorecards to track leading safety indicators and performance management metrics. But even the most advanced management and incident tracking systems are of little value if employees don’t understand their role in using these tools to help make the workplace safer.

**Maintaining a Culture of Safety.** Keeping everyone safe is truly a team effort. Once a culture of safety has been developed, organizations must constantly reinforce safety messages and regularly evaluate progress to ensure the overall strength of the culture. Check in regularly with employees and management to get their feedback and suggestions for what’s working, what’s not, and how to improve. This team-centered approach will once again reinforce the idea that “we’re all in this together” and contribute to employee buy-in.

Establishing a culture of safety involves a fundamental shift in thinking and behavior and organization-wide commitment. It takes time to create and time to foster, but it is an investment well worth making because of the positive impact it can have on the health of any business and its workforce.

If you would like more information on establishing a culture of safety or would like to speak with an expert who can assess your company’s current safety opportunities and challenges, please call (888) 202-3016 or visit [http://www.ulworkplace.com](http://www.ulworkplace.com).

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