

Connecting on a Safe Attitude

Is a “good attitude toward safety” a weak link in your safety program? Try as you might, does the message still fall on deaf ears? They know but forget to take precautions, to eliminate hazards. Shortcuts! Why? Increased production? Do they think safety regulations are off-the-mark and will not protect them? Here are some experiences you can use to connect with your workers on safety.

DOCTOR, HEAL THYSELF

What do workers think of your attitude toward safety? Why? What is your real deep-down attitude toward safety? Do you wink at shortcuts? Is the graveyard shift different, safety-wise, than the day shift? What reason do you have to believe in safety? What about your management team? It is not easy to look inside yourself and to get answers. Actions speak louder than words. One slip, one silent moment or one wink from you negates much preaching on safety.

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A SAFE ATTITUDE

Understanding OSHA’s limitations and strengths helps you establish a foundation for your carrier. OSHA is more correctly named “The Williams and Steiger Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970.” I knew Bill Steiger from our high school days. He was elected to Congress in his early 20s. In 1970, I was a young engineer working in a mill. The mill manager designated me as the person responsible to have our mill in OSHA compliance. It was not a promotion. I would be the one to go to jail for serious violations. OSHA was ominous when it first became law. I studied the OSHA regs by night and came to see that they were reasonable. But something was missing in them. I wrote a letter to Representative Steiger telling him to add into OSHA a regulation to enforce a good attitude toward safety by the people it was meant to protect. It was Pollyanna on my part. Forget it if you expect an enforceable regulation on attitude.

Over the ensuing years, I was in charge of the plant maintenance crews—tradesmen. I had a good attitude toward safety—I thought—until we got a new vice president. He told us, then showed us, that our attitude toward safety was lax, and it was about to change. What a shock. I knew the OSHA regulations. We all wanted our people to go home healthy every day. We were confused, what did he mean? Over time, we came to understand. It was a revelation.

SAFETY PAYS

The new vice president established a separate accounting system to track the cost and savings of safety, broken down for each superintendent. The “savings” were the reductions in medical and lost-time costs. The costs were the costs for our safety programs. We were self-insured. We reviewed the numbers in his management safety meetings. Over time, the numbers showed that the frequency and severity of accidents declined. We came to realize that we had not been fully cognizant of the true medical and lost-time costs, particularly the big ones. It was the “out of sight, out of mind” thing. We forgot about someone off work for a long time. Those were costly. We had become conditioned to think back strains were part of the cost of doing business. He did not think that. The numbers clearly showed safety paid, at least the way he went at it.

REPETITION

Maintenance was told and made to clean up when it completed a job. During cleanup, they made sure the job was actually done, complete, all back together, guards in place. Better than before was how we evaluated ourselves. But still, what was it about the new vice president that brought about change? He earned a reputation of being sincere on safety. He was right so often; he never winked or remained silent on safety. He made safety talk part of what we did, every day, every shift, all shift long. Talk safety, talk safety.

We were a seasoned management team who had seen other vice presidents talk safety, but he was different. He thought, talked and acted in terms of “safety first.” He changed into his PPE when he toured the plant—his own personal hard-toed shoes! He showed us that we were to ask and to get our people to think about what it would take to do a job safely.

We talked about planning to eliminate hazards. It was not just once in a while; it became part of everything we did, just like planning what tools to take out on a job. And we always checked to see whether we were doing it safely, as just part of what we did. And when it was done, we would talk about how it was or was not done safely. We talked a lot of safety, and that became part of what we did; all of us. In hindsight, I wonder if we developed a subconscious counter of how many times a shift we talked safety, eliminated hazards. It became one of those things that kept passing through our brain, over and over. Repetition, repetition.

RULES FOR MAINTENANCE

Part of our success in maintenance was how we managed our crews. They were informed and reformed that we have three rules:

1) When you come through the gate, you need not put on a work mask. You can be you, the same person you are outside work, and you must let the rest of us be us. We get strength from diversity. We understand not all tradesmen have the same array of skills.

2) At work, you work; you do not come to get out of work. The maintenance department is the highest-paid and generally the smartest crew in the plant. They can help figure out how to be productive. They should inform their boss ahead of time when their task will complete so the boss can plan ahead for the next one. Most all of them are assigned an area of the shop to keep clean and in order. Use slack time for that. Help others out, keep an eye on the equipment for a malfunction, find odd jobs to keep busy, keep the boss informed and make yourself available for work.

3) On every task, there will be as few people as possible to get the job done safely and on time. A person must often work alone. If a small part of a task requires additional help, the helper comes and remains only as long as needed. Help each other out. The smaller the crew, the less chance for misunderstanding and letting something “fall in the crack.”

It is a myth that the buddy system is safer. Too often, accidents are caused because one did not know what the partner was doing, or one let something slip that hurt his buddy. That causes back strains. Clamps, vices and rigging are for holding. Rigging is for lifting. Tradesmen, especially millwrights and pipers, need a cart to take their tools out on a job. It is a small portable workbench with a vice and lockable wheels. It is enclosed below for locking up the tools at night.

It was explained that these rules are like how we work at home. It fostered safety. It also fostered productivity, quality work, accountability, customer satisfaction and satisfaction from one’s job. It reduced the number of toolboxes in the shop. Would some variation of this fit your situation?

USE OF TIME

One veteran maintenance foreman made it a point to assign the jobs the night before or a day ahead of time. “They cannot help but think about the job sometime before the next morning.” That can also help them think about doing it safely.

THE WISDOM IN OSHA

Some people have little regard for the wisdom in OSHA regulations. OSHA regulations are largely based on industry standards, such as ANSI standards. Each ANSI standard is written by a committee. These committees are comprised of people who have diverse experience and interests in the topic the standard addresses. For example, ANSI/ASME B20.1-1984, Safety Standard for Conveyors and Related Equipment, was written by an American Society of Mechanical Engineers (ASME) committee using the protocol for writing standards as promulgated by ANSI.

The ASME Conveyor Committee includes people from Con Agra, several conveyor manufacturers, a grain elevator, International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, International Material Management Society, Materials Handling Institute, Motor Vehicle Manufacturers Association and National Grain and Feed Association. They contribute to writing that standard from extensive and diverse experience and interests. It addresses application, design, maintenance, lubrication, adjustment and guarding. The standard they produce is a consensus of what they all can live with. It gets updated every few years. OSHA 1910.265(c)(18) incorporates that ANSI conveyor standard as being part of OSHA (i.e., the law). And in other instances, OSHA borrows heavily from such a standard in writing an OSHA regulation.

So if someone ridicules an OSHA regulation as silly, you often can point out that there is a whole body of people who know better and who took their time to write it down. I do not recall reading an OSHA equipment, tool, signage, guard or walkway regulation that was not based on an accepted standard or practice.

NAVIGATING IN OSHA

How difficult is it to find the applicable OSHA regulation? About half of the states have their own set of safety regulations and bureaucracy. These regulations must be comparable to federal OSHA. Often, the wording is the same. States might have additional regulations for an industry that is prevalent in their state. For example, California and Washington have more written on the sawmilling industry than does federal OSHA.

The federal [OSHA website](#) is user-friendly. It has all of the “titles” like Title 29 for Labor, Title 49 for Transportation, etc. Title 29 is subdivided into sections by topic. You can also see this in a Title 29 book titled Code of Federal Regulations. In the back is an index. Examples of index listings are powered industrial trucks, tanks, machinery guarding and pulp and paper mills, with subcategories under each main topic. These examples indicate that several listings are available to find what you are researching.

For example, within an industry, there will be regulations for the equipment unique to that industry. To learn about guarding something in a papermill, look under guards and under paper mill, and if it is something commonly used in several industries, look for the name of the equipment. You can do a word search on OSHA’s website. If an issue is not clear from your reading of the regs, OSHA’s website has an interpretation section with Q&A for clarification. In the word search box, just type in the topic followed by the word “interpretation,” such as “mobile crane interpretation.” It will then give you a list of all relevant topics.

OSHA has also published compact hardcopy booklets, each devoted to an industry. They are a condensed version in plain English citing regulations that pertain to that industry. For example, the Construction

Industry Digest document number is OSHA 2202. The General Industry Digest is OSHA 2201. They are about 100 pages, have a good table of contents and fit in a back pocket.

A ROUNDABOUT WAY TO SAFETY

Here was another manager's way to communicate safety and other issues with his workers. Our mill manager was an old man who did not understand or have an interest in the manufacturing process; it was complicated. But he achieved communication with the workers through another vehicle (i.e., housekeeping). It was an old mill, but his mill would be clean. The old man toured the mill on his own every day before the morning meeting. He climbed all over anyone who had a mess in their area. If he saw something he could pick up, he would pick it up and put it in his pocket.

Talk was that sometimes a worker flicked a gum wrapper into an aisle and hid to watch him pick it up. If the old man knew it was a setup, he never let on. Regardless, in the morning meeting, he would also light into the one of us who was in charge of the area with the mess. Then we, too, would get after the offender. And because he was so committed and

stern about housekeeping and because workers had no excuse for leaving a mess, he established a rapport with the workers. Then, he used that no-nonsense rapport for communicating other matters, including safety. And he found as many messes as it took to open a dialogue. You did not cross the old man. For this approach, you will need backup from your boss to gain traction with your crew.

CONCLUSION

This article gives several approaches used by different but effective managers to connect with their workers on safety. Get your own inner being set on safety, find your own way to connect and then use that to connect on safety. Safety first. ☺

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