MANAGING YOUR OHS PROGRAM: 7 Keys to an Effective Safety Culture

It's widely agreed that a key to improving safety is to create a 'culture of safety.' Companies typically describe a desired safety culture in terms of values. Although values are the foundation, safety culture is ultimately expressed through what's said and done'through behaviour, according to Judy Agnew, senior vice-president of Safety Solutions, Aubrey Daniels International. 'While each organization has its own description of an ideal safety culture, there are some elements that should be common to all,' says Agnew, who offers the following seven keys to an effective safety culture:[box]

1. The entire workforce relentlessly pursues the identification and remediation of hazards. Correcting hazards as quickly as possible and maintaining good communications around hazards will not only create a safer workplace but also improve your workers' engagement. 'Frontline employees who believe management takes care of hazards are more willing to participate fully in safety initiatives,' says Agnew. (Give this briefing to senior management so they understand the importance of a company's safety culture.)[/box][box]

2. Employees at all levels are equally comfortable stopping each other when at-risk behavior is observed and recognizing each other when safe behavior is observed. Although good constructive feedback is important for improvement, positive reinforcement for safe behaviour is essential for building safe habits.[/box][box]

3. No one is blamed for near misses or incidents. Instead, systemic causes are pursued. Often when people engage in at-risk behaviours that lead to incidents, there are organizational systems and practices that inadvertently encourage those at-risk practices. 'It is important to uncover those and establish accountability for making the changes to the systems and practices to encourage safe behavior,' she says. (For more information on handling near misses, see 'OHS Program: 8 Steps for Effective Near Miss Management,' April 2012, p. 1.)[/box][box]

4. The fear of discipline, which drives under-reporting and stifles involvement, has been driven out of the culture. Discipline has a place, but most safety issues can be effectively dealt with without discipline, which has side effects that work against building a culture of safety, according to Agnew. (Remember'you can't discipline workers for exercising safety rights, such as the right to refuse unsafe work, but you can discipline them for violating safety rules and procedures.)[/box][box]

5. The workforce is characterized by good relationships at all levels. These relationships enable open, honest conversations about what's working, what isn't and what still needs to change.[/box][box]

6. Safety is integrated into day-to-day work. It's not treated as something separate from daily operations.[/box][box]

7. Successes are celebrated along the way. Pride shouldn't be focused solely on a company's safety record, but also in what's being done every day, all day to achieve that record.[/box]

Bottom Line

'Once you have defined the ideal safety culture for your organization, the science of behavior analysis can be used to develop behaviours consistent with that culture,' says Agnew. 'Targeted positive reinforcement of desired behaviours leads to rapid change and the effects multiply quickly as all employees begin to not only display desired cultural behaviors, but to reinforce those behaviors in others.'

INSIDER **SOURCE**

Judy Agnew: Senior Vice-President of Safety Solutions, Aubrey Daniels International