STEPS TO LEAD CULTURE CHANGE
Ensuring Leadership Accountability for Safety
By Kevin Kolhonen

Every safety professional should have one goal: Ensure that everyone goes home safe at the end of the day. Accomplishing this starts with safety culture. One person cannot single-handedly change an entire company's view on safety.

However, there are ways EHS professionals can start to make a difference. Changing safety culture is a marathon, not a sprint. From the starting line, one can only look so far ahead to see what challenges await. After the race begins, different obstacles, turns and decisions will likely appear.

The same is true when implementing a safety program. EHS professionals must understand that a safety role is not about completing checklists, but rather helping people change their outlook on the importance of safety on the jobsite. This article discusses steps EHS professionals can take to make their way to the finish line with their safety program and improve safety culture overall.

Connect With People & Be Visible

Everyone has heard the cliché about having "boots on the ground," but it holds true. Make connections both in the field and at the office.

Communication is the biggest hurdle; safety professionals must find a way to establish themselves both at the corporate level and in the field. Learning people's names and knowing each person's story can go a long way as an EHS professional. This is how cultures start to change: knowing the employees and understanding why they show up to work each day. Whether it is their children, their spouse or a house they want to buy, find out why they are there and what is important to them. Once you know this, safety becomes the easy part. This is what drives their decision-making process and ultimately will be their overall reason for prioritizing safety.

Networking within the industry can also be beneficial. Introduce yourself to general contractors, insurance professionals or other safety representatives on jobs. You will be surprised how far a handshake can get you. Networking is also a great way to become an industry leader in the field and communicates a company's safety initiatives.

Seek to Learn & Understand

Understand all areas of the company. Knowledge is power, and the more EHS professionals know, the more benefit their knowledge can offer. How does the company operate internally? What kind of work does the company perform? How do workers complete their job tasks? What equipment is used? Where does safety fit into operations? The list of potential questions is virtually endless. EHS professionals must know the ins and outs of all company operations. This knowledge can help identify where to focus efforts. Understanding the work and the flow of projects from start to finish can make it clear how to incorporate safety into the day-to-day operations at the company.

From a professional standpoint, EHS workers should always be looking for opportunities to better themselves and learn new things. There is an abundance of courses, classes, roundtables and meetings that revolve around safety. Get involved with local unions, associations and OSHA offices. The more you learn, the better you perform as a safety professional. Learning helps EHS professionals build their career and develop professional expertise.

Review Relevant Documents & Data

Obtain current copies of the company safety manual, job hazard analyses, pretask plans and other relevant documents. EHS professionals must understand current safety documents and practices

LEADING SAFETY CULTURE CHANGE & ACCOUNTABILITY

- **Build trust through visibility and relationships.** Spend consistent time in the field and office, learn employees' names and motivations, and actively network with industry partners to make safety personal and credible.
- **Learn the business inside and out.** Understand workflows, job tasks, equipment and project lifecycles so safety can be integrated naturally into daily operations.
- **Use data to target real risks.** Regularly review safety documents, OSHA logs, injury reports and loss runs to identify trends, uncover root causes and prioritize training or policy updates.
- **Clarify safety roles at every level.** Educate management, office staff and field workers on their specific responsibilities to align safety expectations and communication across the organization.
- **Create accountability with clear checks and balances.** Set explicit safety expectations, reinforce stop work authority for everyone and encourage transparent feedback to support compliance and improvement.
- **Drive continuous improvement through measurement and engagement.** Track meaningful safety key performance indicators, update programs as standards evolve, and empower employees through training, safety committees and open dialogue.

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at their organization. Part of this process is finding both the bad and the good. Look for areas where improvements can be made.

Historical data is a big part of the review process. Look at past OSHA logs, injury reports and, most importantly, loss runs. Loss runs, which can be obtained through the insurance broker or carrier, are a major indicator of past years' losses and what injury or loss trends are occurring at the company. Claim history and understanding the root cause of these losses are key to helping prevent them in the future.

Find the loss trends in the losses and determine the best action plan to address them. This can be achieved in many ways, but some of the most common approaches are training, policy development and even simple conversations.

Ensure Understanding of Safety's Role

Safety occurs at three different levels in a company: management, office staff and field staff. All three levels are vital to the success of the safety program, and each level must understand their role. Without proper education, ignorance can thrive in the workforce.

•**Management.** Safety starts with management's involvement and readiness to make changes to improve their safety programs. Injuries and other losses—whether general liability or automobile—can put a company in a bad spot. A company is rated by a few different organizations, but the two most important are the workers' compensation board and OSHA. When a company is performing poorly, these two ratings affect the company's ability to bid work and retain clients. Experience modification rates and OSHA's days away, restricted or transferred (DART) and lost time ratings are major indicators of a company's safety performance. It is imperative that the company understands this and the importance of safety throughout all levels of the organization.

•**Office staff.** While safety may not be as high a priority for office workers as it is for those on a worksite, safety often starts at a project level when a project is won by project managers and executives. These workers should be educated about the importance of relaying safety requirements for each jobsite to the field, foremen and safety representatives. Without this line of communication, a breakdown in the safety workflow can occur. Information can be lost, and safety compliance could go right out the window.

•**Field staff.** This is the first impression made on any new hire or rehire. When onboarding a new worker, this is the opportunity to sell the company's safety program. Some company swag goes a long way during these kickoffs—make sure to add to the orientation to include a bit of company merchandise.

Utilize Checks & Balances

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culture. EHS professionals must be clear in their expectations about how the workforce must adhere to safety policies and procedures that revolve around compliance, from PPE to safe work performance. There must be a clear picture for all employees of what equipment they wear every day and how to safely complete their work without putting themselves in dangerous situations.

Employees must also understand that stop work authority is granted to every single person who works at a company. This goes for intern, apprentice, journeyman, foreman and even CEO. If there is a question pertaining to the life or safety of someone working at a jobsite, anyone can stop the work being performed to determine whether it is safe to continue.

Safety professionals rely on feedback from coworkers just as much as the coworkers rely on them. It is important to have open transparency within the company when it comes to safety. This approach shows areas where the company needs to improve performance and areas where operations look good.

Foster Continuous Improvement & Adaptation

Every well-run safety program improves and changes over time. This allows the program to be a living document. As industry safety compliance changes, so should the safety program. OSHA is continuously updating their standards and interpretations. It is strongly recommended that each company does the same.

One of the best ways to improve is to develop key performance indicators to offer a picture of how the company is operating from a safety standpoint from a more analytical perspective. Some of the most important key performance indicators to follow include:

•reported injuries (all injuries reported during the calendar year, recordable or not)

•OSHA recordables (injuries that need to be reported on the OSHA log)

• DART cases (cases where an employee either missed work or was on restricted duty)

•DART rate (mathematical calculation that describes the number of recordable injuries and illnesses per 100 full-time employees that resulted in days away from work, restricted work activity or job transfer)

•total recordable case rate (number of safety incidents reported compared with the number of workers present and the number of hours worked)

•safety observations (visible safety issues observed during site safety walks)

Maintain this data quarterly throughout the year to ensure that the company understands current safety performance in relation to the data. EHS professionals should use this information at the end of the year to compare company performance against itself and against the industry. Companies are able to compare their OSHA ratings with those of other companies with similar operations.

Empower Employees & Leaders

All employees should be given opportunities to learn. Education and training should be a high priority for all safety representatives. The more the organization understands safety, the lower the risk level of the work being performed. With education comes awareness, and with awareness comes safe work practices.

Starting a safety committee is a great way to open communication between the office and the field. Diversity on this committee is a huge benefit to open dialogue regarding safety and how the company can improve it. It is very important to get different aspects of the company involved, from human resources and project management to field staff and senior management.

Both field and office staff should question safety. EHS professionals should expect to be questioned on safety requirements and welcome any related conversations. EHS professionals should be sure to determine the answer to any questions asked and make a point to follow up with the person who asked it.

Understand the Role of an EHS Leader

EHS professionals are teachers. The job is to educate and lead, not to become a checklist and compliance warrior. The designation of occupational EHS professional is a big role, but at the top of the list of job duties should be safety teacher. EHS professionals are in their role to help workers understand both how to work safely and why they should want to. There is a lot of truth in the phrase, "You can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make them drink." EHS professionals can only bring workers so far; it is up to them whether they truly adhere to the program. When employees refuse to work safely or wear the correct PPE after multiple attempts to teach them the correct way, then the compliance piece comes into play.

Ensure that you are in this profession for the right reasons. Safety does not need egos; it needs thinkers and problem-solvers. EHS professionals want to see the whole organization—every single person—come to work safely and go home to their friends, families and loved ones in the same condition. **PSJ**

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