Establishing Credibility as Safety Professionals

Hazards are ever-present in the steel plant environment, and a heightened awareness and emphasis on safety is a necessary priority for our industry. This monthly column, coordinated by members of the AIST Safety & Health Technology Committee, focuses on procedures and practices to promote a safe working environment for everyone.

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Comments are welcome. If you have questions about this topic or other safety issues, please contact safetyfirst@aist.org. Please include your full name, company name, mailing address and email in all correspondence.

So you are a safety professional — now what? No matter how you got to this point — as an eager participant who just graduated college, a person looking for a change or someone who was just lucky enough to get an extra hat thrown their way — you may be asking, what am I supposed to do? Safety is a very broad field and there are many things that must be done to satisfy government regulation or company policies. To most employees, these tasks do not provide value and do not relate to their jobs.

Many employees in your company, both managers and hourly personnel, may have worked in environments without formalized safety programs. For this reason, many do not see the value in the safety profession. They have gotten by without you for this long, so why would they need you now? To succeed in this role, you must establish credibility with these employees, not just develop rules and policies they have to follow. Building credibility takes time and a great deal of work. It is something that can be very difficult to establish, but is very easy to lose. Credibility is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "the quality of being trusted and believed in." There is no magic formula for establishing credibility, but doing so is essential for safety processionals. The degrees, certifications, accomplishments at past jobs or the abbreviations on your business card do not mean anything to people who do not see your position as a necessity. It is a process that requires you to prove yourself valuable to these people over and over again.

Being credible is not a luxury. You need all employees to believe and trust in you, your decisions, and what you are advocating for.

Without that bond, your efforts will face resistance or potentially fail altogether. Employees who see you as credible are more willing to accept accountability and additional responsibilities and even drive safety improvements. The credibility you establish could be the difference between an employee doing what's right and an employee cutting corners when no one is watching.

What constitutes trustworthiness and believability varies from person to person, but listed in this article are five ways to help establish your credibility as a safety professional.

1. Don't Stop at Identifying Risk

As safety professionals, we are expected to identify risk, but simply recognizing it is not enough. In addition to recognizing risk, we need to assess the risk and work with the employee base to eliminate the hazard. Stopping a task, job or project because of a safety issue and not assisting in the development of a solution is a surefire way to lose credibility. To gain trust, we must be able to spot hazards and come up with solutions to those problems. Here are a few items to keep in mind:

- Recognize what can go wrong, and understand how severe the implications could be and the likelihood of occurrence.
- Get involved — don't avoid something just because you are uncomfortable or unsure.
- Remember that you should be part of the solution process, not the whole process. Getting help and including others will be a key part of

hazard elimination and gaining buy-in from other individuals.

- Not all hazards can be solved quickly. In these situations, make it safe and take action immediately, even if it is a temporary solution. Never allow a hazard to remain uncorrected for any period of time. Your employees will expect you to address their concerns and unsafe conditions. Doing so in a timely manner is a great way to earn their trust and respect.

2. Become an Expert — Learn, Grow and Improve

To gain credibility in safety, you must be an expert not only in safety but also in the processes and work that is being performed. In a field as broad as safety, no one person could ever know everything. Learn your products/services, know what aspect of safety is most important to what you do, and make safety work for your company. Below are some helpful tips:

- Establish yourself as a trusted advisor by knowing how you add value for your employees.
- Understand the work being done. To really understand the work and what is being asked of the employees, don't be afraid to get your hands dirty and get in there. This will help your understanding and make you a resource in your facility.
- Admit what you don't know. Part of learning and growing is knowing when you are not the expert. Use this opportunity to strengthen your skill set, but remember the ultimate goal is keeping employees safe, so get the right people involved.
- Learn what you don't know. This could be a regulation that you are not familiar with or a hard skill such as reading prints. Whatever it is, you will build credibility if you take the initiative to broaden your skill set.
- Treat all losses as an opportunity to learn, not to assign blame. It's easy to get mad and take it personally when an injury occurs, but chances are it is not your fault. Use these unfortunate occurrences as a chance to reduce or eliminate the potential for incidents. Use losses to teach and as a way to prevent reoccurrence.
- Share what you've learned with others and get their feedback to identify new ways to use the information. Get your employees involved — they are a great source to get ideas from.
- Help, support and include others in the process. You may be surprised at what you can learn from your employees if you work together.

3. Communicate Openly and Honestly

Communicate, communicate and communicate! Implementing safety involves a lot of change; if the changes are not properly managed, it can lead to confusion, pushback and eventually resentment. To avoid conflict, manage change by sharing information, planning and communicating in advance, and share decision-making responsibilities during the process. The following list offers some advice on communication:

- Know your audience. When speaking with management, use their language; likewise, when speaking with shop employees, ensure that what you say connects. Avoid the clichés; employees don't want to hear "safety first."
- Listen to concerns to understand them, not just to reply. Listen intently, so you understand their needs and you can develop a plan to address them. If you don't know or are not the expert, get someone else involved. Spreading "fake news" will destroy credibility.
- Ensure communication has taken place; don't assume that it has. Discussions in passing are a surefire way for things to fall through the cracks and a way to lose credibility with employees. If an employee tells us something, they expect us to act on it no matter how many things are on our plate. If you are distracted or focused on other issues when an employee is voicing concerns, ask if you can follow up with them at a later time when you can give them the attention they deserve.
- Ask for what you need/want. Understand that the answer may be "No." No does not mean the issue cannot be resolved; no just means we have to rethink the solution. No may require temporary fixes, administrative solutions to protect employees or creative thinking to address the concern.
- Make sure that you take time to recognize the accomplishments of your team and employees. A simple "thank you" can go a long way.
- Get to know your team through personal contact and effective interpersonal communication.

4. Hold Yourself and Your Co-Workers Accountable

Safety professionals should always lead by example. If you don't follow the rules, your team will not respect the rules. Here are some ways professionals can improve accountability:

- Own your mistakes. No one is perfect and no one expects you to be. When you slip up, take full responsibility for your actions and decisions

and do everything in your power to correct the issue as quickly as possible.

- Develop meaningful techniques to measure safety performance. Use past performance and accomplishments to measure success. Set goals for yourself and employees.
- Challenge yourself and co-workers to follow and improve the policies and rules. Recognize safe work practices and those who go above and beyond to maintain a safe workplace.
- Pursue incremental improvements. Know the current state and the target state, make small adjustments until the target state is reached, and then develop a new target state.
- Address underperformers. If employees are performing poorly, putting themselves or others in danger, it must be addressed. The key is to address the situation, not attack the employee. Provide feedback and coaching to help the person learn. People who are challenged are more engaged, focused and more likely to correct or report hazards as well as positively contribute to the collective safety effort.

5. Be a Leader

Being a leader is the activity of leading a group of people or an organization or possessing the ability to do this. Leadership involves establishing a clear vision; sharing that vision with others so that they will follow willingly; providing the information, knowledge and methods to realize that vision; and coordinating and balancing the conflicting interests of all members. To establish credibility as a leader, remember the following:

- Don't wait for someone else to tell you what to do. Figure out what is standing in the way of your employee's success and fix it. By doing this, you will not only increase your credibility but will also make your own job easier down the road. Be proactive — don't wait for something to happen to take action!

- Confront issues head-on. You can't worry about the popularity of your decisions; you have a job to do and doing what is right/needed will earn you respect throughout your organization. Get the job done but be sure to treat each other with fairness and respect in the process.
- Establish a vision. As a leader, you will not spend all of your time leading. We must provide the vision, a goal that may seem unattainable in our current state but is something to work toward nonetheless. How do we get to these goals? We need to give the people with the knowledge, our employees, the opportunity and authority to define what must be done to meet these goals.
- Trust your co-workers. Trust is a two-way street. Employees are trusted to make important decisions everyday across many functions, but we rarely empower employees to make decisions regarding their own safety. Give away ownership; people don't want to follow rules and tire quickly of receiving orders. Give them your trust and the opportunity to put their stamp on things. When mistakes happen (and they will), make sure you have their backs and you will get their loyalty.

Conclusion

Being credible is not optional and is not the same as being liked. You probably like many people, but do you trust them, believe in them and would you follow those people? When we find someone credible, we tend to emulate how they think and act. We do this out of respect and also because we don't want to let that person down. Much of safety comes down to personal decision-making. Have you done the things necessary to instill your beliefs and values in your employees? When decision time comes, will your employees pass the test or are they going to put themselves at risk? Your credibility may just be the difference between tragedy and just another day at the shop.   ✦