

Set the Standard With Management Safety Visibility: Do They Know Your Name?

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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When I worked as a corporate health, safety and environmental (HSE) director, I supported large construction projects all over the world. Part of my responsibility was to help projects build strong safety cultures. On one occasion, I visited a job that was not meeting the company's safety expectations. I discovered part of the problem the first morning that I was there. Each day, the workers would assemble in a large break tent before they dispersed to their work areas. The project leadership team would use this opportunity to communicate critical messages to the workforce.

I liked this standard method of communication but I noticed a problem in the first five minutes of the meeting. The project manager stood up to talk to the group about safety, and he had to introduce himself to the crowd because no one knew who he was! He never came to these meetings and he rarely walked the job. I did not expect everyone on the job to know the project manager personally, but he had been employed there for more than a year. The crowd should recognize their leader and they should see him or her in a safety context on a regular basis. The fact that the workers did not know the project manager was one indicator of a lack of management engagement. The result was poor safety performance.

Safety commitment does not exist without visibility. Leaders can demonstrate their conviction to safety principles in strategic ways and it does not have to cost money. A leader's presence in the right safety-related process will demonstrate what is important to the leader. Employees have to see visible actions that represent commitment.

One strategic visibility technique leaders can use is to attend supervisor pre-shift meetings. Supervisors use pre-shift meetings to align teams before they get started for work. Safety is a primary focus in these meetings. The pre-shift meeting should take the opportunity to identify critical steps, discuss potential safety hazards and review injury prevention tools. This pre-planning method is a cornerstone to safety success because leaders have to plan safety into every step. And, the forum is a strategic opportunity for a manager to show his or her commitment to safety. A manager's presence demonstrates what is important to them.

Developing a Strategic Visibility Initiative: What Should It Look Like?

Step 1 — Identify which managers and senior-level employees will participate in the process. Employees need to see decision-makers in a safety context on a consistent basis. Examples of leaders that should participate include plant managers, project managers, department managers, superintendents, general foremen and any other leaders that a company will hold responsible for safety performance.

Step 2 — Define how often you want designated leaders to participate. Daily participation is preferable but is not always possible with the demands of a dynamic work environment. Frequency is important, but consistency is also critical. So, establish realistic expectations that you can obtain.

Step 3 — Develop a calendar and track participation. If you don't

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keep up with who fulfills their responsibilities, some workers will not participate at the levels you expect. Put names and dates on a board that everyone can see. Make the process visible just like you do for other performance metrics. Why should safety be any different?

Step 4 — Hold leaders accountable for their participation! The goal is 100% compliance with the standards a company establishes. Every leadership team has to decide how they will address people who do not meet expectations. That is why you have to have buy-in from all levels of the organization.

Step 5 — Begin every leadership staff meeting with a strategic visibility moment. Have at least one person describe what they learned in their most recent pre-shift meeting. This discipline will help validate the process on a daily basis and the discussion will hold leaders accountable for activity in this critical process.

The five-step process is simple but your team will have to commit their actions to the concept. As you roll out the strategic visibility initiative, prepare your team to address three common challenges:

Challenge No. 1 — Leaders will make comments like, “I don’t have time to go to pre-shift meetings” or “I have other commitments that prevent my participation.” While these comments may be legitimate, leaders solve scheduling problems every day. This challenge is no different. Your team can find a collective solution. Organizations find the time to do the things that they feel add value to their business. A leadership presence in a safety context will add value!

Challenge No. 2 — If workers are not used to seeing management in a pre-shift setting, they will wonder why you are there. Put their minds at ease and learn their names. Let workers know that you want to make a positive impact on safety. You want to demonstrate your commitment. Do not tell them, “Safety made me participate.” That response does not help the process. Over time, your participation will become something each worker expects and appreciates.

Challenge No. 3 — A common question will arise when you introduce this strategic visibility practice. Leaders will ask, “What do you want me to do when I attend the pre-shift meeting?” The answer is simple. Ask safety-related questions! Workers know your interest by the questions you ask and they gain respect for you as a leader when you help them. The following are some sample questions that a manager can ask during a pre-shift meeting:

1. What are the critical steps in your job?
2. What is the worst thing that could happen?
3. How do you prevent the worst thing from happening?
4. How can I help you prevent a potential injury?
5. Do you feel like you get the proper safety training?
6. Do you feel like you get the proper instructions to perform tasks safely?
7. Do you feel comfortable stopping work if a hazard is present?
8. How do people around you demonstrate their commitment to safety?
9. Do you have the appropriate tools to complete your work safely?
10. Do you believe that all incidents (injuries, near misses, first aids, etc.) can be prevented?
11. Is there anything safety-related you would like for me to evaluate?
12. If you could make one safety improvement, what would you do?

Conclusion

A safety culture does not exist without management visibility and engagement. An important step in building the culture is to make sure employees know your name. Establish organizational safe habits that promote engagement. That way, workers can sense your sincere dedication to their safety. Consistent attendance at pre-shift meetings provides a forum for leaders to engage their workforce with useful dialogue. The benefit is that leaders can identify opportunities for safety improvements while they get to know their workforce. ◆