

Safety Leadership: The Supervisor's Role

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.

Author



Martha Misch

Zurich Services Corp.,
Schaumburg, Ill., USA
martha.misch@zurichna.com

Contact

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.

A supervisor's ability to lead, positively influence behavior, and manage regulatory compliance reflects an organization's character in quality, productivity and safety culture. This article will cover these key areas and illustrate why the supervisor's role matters in an organization's risk management program.

As workforces have become leaner over the past several years, the supervisor's role continues to be one of the critical elements in an organization's ability to carry out the mission of the organization.³ Supervisors are the direct link between the workforce and upper-level management.² The supervisor's role has evolved drastically from solely focusing on production pressures to a front-line leader in safety coaching, mentoring and training to his or her employees.¹¹

Discussion

Supervisors exist in many forms with different levels of skills, knowledge and experience. The supervisor position is a multi-dimensional role that can fulfill both management's and employees' expectations. These expectations include managing safety. Even if supervisors do not have a formal background in occupational safety, they can influence a successful safety culture.

Supervisors have some of the responsibility to ensure that the workplace is free from unnecessary hazards and conditions that may affect their employees' physical or mental health. Sustaining a strong safety culture is a continuous process, and there are methods that supervisors can apply to enhance their company's risk management program. The key safety concepts that will be discussed in this article are:

- Safety leadership.
- Behavior management.
- Regulatory and compliance standards.

Guidance

Safety Leadership — Supervisors should try to incorporate safety into their leadership style to project expectations to their staff and lead by example by doing the right things every day. The amount of effort a supervisor spends on daily accident prevention measures can be reflected in determining whether or not loss potential (accidents/injuries) is minimized.

To be effective, supervisors should:³

- Know safety and health expectations and rules.
- Have the ability to see potential and actual hazards.
- Take action and mitigate hazards.
- Lead employees to the right answers.
- Know how to influence positive employee behavior through their job duties.
- Have the will and enthusiasm through each process to keep doing it.

Supervisors have opportunities to make a difference in the lives of their employees and create a positive, fulfilling atmosphere.¹

Behavior Management — Building a safety culture takes time, practice and participation. A culture is based on the knowledge, customs and practices that define acceptable behavior within a particular group of people.³ Supervisors can shape a positive safety culture by making a clear differentiation between acceptable and unacceptable behavior

through leading by example.⁹ For example, a supervisor wears proper personal protection equipment (PPE) just as their employees in designated work areas at all times.

Two ways supervisors can achieve positive influence in behavior management are through coaching and mentoring.⁸ Coaching can be about improving skills and operational performance on the job and engaging employees to conduct their work responsibly. This approach would be best applied to correct an unsafe behavior such as an employee not wearing proper PPE in a PPE-designated area. Mentoring is more supportive in nature, rather than instructive. This approach helps individuals develop their own critical-thinking and problem-solving skills. Through effective communication, supervisors can coach and mentor employees on the key safety expectations that apply to the company, the community and the law.¹

Regulatory and Compliance Standards— Supervisors should try to know the regulatory and compliance standards that apply to the workplace. Knowing the laws and rights of the workplace helps make supervisors aware not to violate them and expose the company to legal liabilities.⁶ The laws regarding job safety and health protection are covered under the Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSH Act) that is managed by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).¹⁰

Supervisors should try to provide employees with a work environment that is free of recognizable hazards that could cause serious physical harm and also complies with occupational safety and health regulations along with company safety guidelines. The value of supervisors participating in safety training is to competently learn an overview of safety standards and be exposed to the concepts and processes of safety management.³

It takes time for the daily practice of safety regulations to become second nature. One of the main goals of safety management boils down to this: ensure that all employees return safely home to their loved ones at the end of the work day.⁵

Conclusion

Supervisors matter because an injured employee is an individual, not a statistic.⁷ Supervisors are the strongest allies of safety efforts in the workplace.⁷ Gaining experience and knowledge in safety leadership, behavior management and regulatory and compliance competencies enables supervisors to produce a positive impact at their workplace every day.

References

1. "10 Employment Laws That Supervisors Need to Know," HR Insights Blog, 11 August 2014, <http://www.yourerc.com/blog/post/10-Employment-Laws-that-Supervisors-Need-to-Know.aspx>.

2. Callor, R., and Weldon, C., "The Thirteen Safety Functions of a Good Supervisor," *ASSE Body of Knowledge*, 10, 1–10, 2011, retrieved 18 July 2014, www.safetybok.org.
3. Dawson, L., "Safety for the Leader/Manager From Compliance to Excellence," *Safety Awakenings*, 1 February 2006, retrieved 21 July 2014, <http://www.safetyawakenings.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Safety-For-The-Leader-and-Manager.pdf>.
4. "Employer-Reported Workplace Injuries and Illnesses —2012," Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, 7 November 2013, retrieved 18 July 2014, http://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/osh_11072013.pdf.
5. Greer, M., "Supervisor? You've Got to Be Kidding," *ASSE Body of Knowledge*, 1, 2011, retrieved 18 July 2014, www.safetybok.org.
6. "HR Top Ten — Rules Every Supervisor Should Know," Foundation e-Bulletin, retrieved 11 August 2014. <http://www.phccweb.org/NewsPublication/ebulletindetail.cfm?ItemNumber=11344&ewebToken=&Site=PHCC>.
7. Krause, T.R., "Motivating Employees for Safety Improvement: Reaching From the Shop Floor to the Boardroom," *ASSE Professional Development Conference*, American Society of Safety Engineers, January 2007.
8. MISAC, "What Makes a Good Supervisor?" 2007, <http://www.skills.sa.gov.au>.
9. O'Dea, A., and Flin, R., "The Role of Managerial Leadership in Determining Workplace Safety Outcomes," *Health and Safety Executive*, Vol. 10, 2003, pp. 1–61.
10. Occupational Safety and Health Administration, <http://www.osha.gov>.
11. Robbins, S.P., and DeCenzo, D.A., *Supervision Today!*, 4th ed., Pearson/Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, N.J, 2004.
12. Thompson, R.C.; Hilton, T.F.; and Witt, L.A., "Where the Safety Rubber Meets the Shop Floor: A Confirmatory Model of Management Influence on Workplace Safety," *Journal of Safety Research*, Vol. 29, No. 1, 1998, pp. 15–24.
13. Topf, M., "Generational Differences Regarding Safety, Health & Wellness," *ASSE Body of Knowledge*, 1 March 2014, retrieved 18 July 2014, <http://www.safetybok.org/assets/1/7/generation-differences-regarding-safety-health-wellness.pdf>.

Disclaimer

The information in this publication was compiled by The Zurich Services Corp. from sources believed to be reliable for informational purposes only. All sample policies and procedures herein should serve as a guideline, which you can use to create your own policies and procedures. We trust that you will customize these samples to reflect your own operations and believe that these samples may serve as a helpful platform for this endeavor. Any and all information contained herein is not intended to constitute legal advice and accordingly, you should consult with your own attorneys when developing programs and policies. We do not guarantee the accuracy of this information or any results and further assume no liability in connection with this publication and sample policies and procedures, including any information, methods or safety suggestions contained herein. Moreover, Zurich reminds you that this cannot be assumed to contain every acceptable safety and compliance procedure or that additional procedures might not be appropriate under the circumstances. The subject matter of this publication is not tied to any specific insurance product nor will adopting these policies and procedures ensure coverage under any insurance policy. ♦