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.

Safety Leadership: The Supervisor’s Role

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. Supervisors are the direct link between the workforce and upper-level management. 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.

Discussion

Supervisors exist in many forms with different levels of skills, knowledge and experience. The supervisor position is a multidimensional 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:

- 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.

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. Supervisors can shape a positive safety culture by making a clear differentiation between acceptable and unacceptable behavior.
through leading by example. 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. 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.

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. 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).

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.

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.

Conclusion

Supervisors matter because an injured employee is an individual, not a statistic. Supervisors are the strongest allies of safety efforts in the workplace. 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


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