

Walking the Talk: The Supervisor's Role in Building a Strong Safety Culture

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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.

Employees learn what matters most by watching what happens during the normal pressure of the workday. When a line is behind schedule, a repair is needed quickly or a shortcut looks tempting, the supervisor's response tells the team whether safety is truly part of the operation or simply part of the paperwork.

Supervisors play such an outsized role in safety culture. Policies, procedures and leadership messages establish expectations, but frontline supervisors translate those expectations into daily decisions. Through what they say, what they correct, what they overlook and what they model, supervisors show employees how safety fits alongside production, quality and customer commitments.

A strong safety culture is built through consistent leadership behaviors, visible commitment and practical engagement at the supervisory level. It can also be measured, not only by looking back at injury rates, but by watching the leading indicators that show whether supervisors are actively influencing risk before incidents occur.

Defining Safety Culture

Safety culture can be defined as the shared commitment of an organization to prioritize safety in every aspect of its operations. It reflects the collective attitudes, beliefs and behaviors related to safety — particularly when no one

is watching or when competing pressures arise.

In organizations with strong safety cultures, employees believe safety is genuinely valued, hazards are identified before they become incidents, safe behavior is reinforced consistently, and people are comfortable reporting concerns without fear of being dismissed or blamed.

Conversely, weak safety cultures often show up as inconsistent rule enforcement, tolerance for shortcuts, underreporting hazards and a reactive approach to incidents.

While senior leadership defines strategic priorities, supervisors determine how safety values are experienced on the front line. Their influence makes the difference between safety as a written expectation and safety as a lived reality.

Why Safety Culture Matters

The benefits of a strong safety culture extend well beyond regulatory compliance.

Organizations that manage safety well typically see fewer injuries, lower incident severity, better morale, stronger retention, improved work quality and greater trust between employees and management.

From a supervisory perspective, a strong safety culture also simplifies leadership. Clear expectations, engaged employees and fewer incidents allow supervisors to focus

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on performance and improvement rather than crisis response.

Importantly, safety culture and operational excellence are not opposing goals. In fact, organizations that integrate safety into daily operations often outperform peers in reliability, quality and customer satisfaction.

Supervisors as Culture Carriers

Supervisors serve as the primary carriers of safety culture within an organization. Employees observe them closely — often more closely than senior leadership — looking for cues about what truly matters.

Their influence shows up in ordinary decisions: whether safety is discussed during production meetings, whether hazards are corrected promptly or pushed aside, whether rules are applied consistently, and whether employees are supported when they raise concerns.

When supervisors consistently demonstrate that safety matters, employees internalize that message. When supervisors send mixed or contradictory signals — such as prioritizing shortcuts to meet deadlines, employees quickly learn that safety is negotiable.

Because of this visibility and influence, supervisors shape safety culture more through behavior than formal messaging.

Walking the Talk

One of the most critical responsibilities of a supervisor is to “walk the talk.” Employees are highly sensitive to inconsistencies between stated expectations and observed behaviors. When supervisors say the right things about safety but act differently under pressure, trust erodes quickly.

Walking the talk means following safety rules without exception, wearing required personal protective equipment (PPE) consistently, stopping work when conditions are unsafe, and holding everyone accountable regardless of role, title or tenure.

Supervisors also “walk the talk” by how they respond to problems. Taking hazards seriously, listening without defensiveness and acting on concerns reinforces credibility. Ignoring issues or minimizing risks sends the opposite message.

Credibility is the foundation of safety leadership, and credibility is built through consistent action.

Accountability as a Leadership Tool

Strong safety cultures require accountability — but not blame. Effective supervisors understand the difference between holding people accountable for behaviors and punishing outcomes after the fact.

Good accountability is fair, consistent, focused on behavior and centered on learning. It considers risk and intent, but it does not excuse unsafe choices or allow repeat issues to be normalized.

When employees know expectations are applied objectively and respectfully, they are more likely to comply with rules and engage in safety efforts. When accountability feels arbitrary or punitive, reporting decreases and risk increases.

Supervisors set the standard for how accountability is applied and perceived.

Hazard Recognition: A Core Supervisory Function

Hazard recognition is one of a supervisor’s most important safety responsibilities. Hazards exist long before incidents occur, and supervisors are often best positioned to identify them because of their operational knowledge and proximity to work.

Effective hazard recognition requires regular observation of tasks and conditions, awareness of informal workarounds, attention to changes in equipment or staffing, and steady dialogue with employees who know the work best.

However, supervisors cannot carry this responsibility alone. Strong safety cultures rely on employee involvement. Supervisors must create an environment where employees feel comfortable identifying hazards and reporting near misses.

Encouraging hazard recognition starts with the supervisor’s response. When reports are welcomed and addressed, employees continue speaking up. When concerns are dismissed, silence follows.

Continuous Hazard Awareness and Improvement

Work environments are dynamic. New equipment, procedures, staffing changes and external pressures introduce new risks. As a result, hazard awareness must be continuous.

Supervisors support continuous improvement by keeping safety in routine conversations, learning from near misses and incidents, using inspections as coaching opportunities, and adapting controls as work conditions change.

A proactive approach prevents injuries before they occur and signals maturity in safety leadership. Waiting for incidents to drive action is costly — not only in human terms but also in trust and morale.

The Power of Frequency: “More Touches”

One of the most effective ways supervisors influence safety culture is through repetition and visibility. Safety should not appear only during training sessions or after incidents — it should be present every day.

These “touches” can be brief: a safety reminder during a huddle, an informal conversation during the shift, recognition when a safe behavior is observed, or a question that connects safety to productivity and quality.

Frequent, informal engagement keeps safety relevant and normalizes conversations about risk. Over time, safety becomes part of how work is done — not a separate initiative.

Modeling Safe Behavior

Employees learn what is acceptable by watching their supervisors. Modeling safe behavior is often more impactful than enforcement alone.

Modeling includes demonstrating proper task execution, using required PPE, following critical procedures such as lockout or confined space entry, and taking the time to work safely even when schedules are tight.

When supervisors model behaviors they expect to see, they set a clear standard for their employees. When they bypass rules, even occasionally, they undermine expectations across the team.

Language Shapes Culture

The words supervisors use — and how often they use them — matter. Safety culture is reinforced through language just as much as through actions.

A simple question such as “What hazards do you see before starting?” can change the tone of a job. So can “Let’s make sure we have safe access here” or “Thanks for pointing that out.” These small comments reinforce that safety is part of the normal conversation, not a separate program.

The Business Impact of Supervisor-Led Safety

Beyond injury prevention, supervisor-driven safety culture produces measurable business benefits. Strong supervisory engagement can help reduce workers’ compensation costs, lower turnover, improve operational reliability, strengthen quality outcomes and protect organizational reputation.

Safety culture is not a barrier to performance — it is a performance enabler. Supervisors who understand this connection are better equipped to balance competing priorities without compromising safety.

Practical Actions Supervisors Can Take

Building safety culture does not require dramatic change overnight. It starts with a handful of daily practices: being visible during work activities, modeling expected behaviors, responding positively to hazard reports, integrating safety into everyday conversations, closing the loop on concerns, and treating incidents and near misses as learning opportunities.

These actions, repeated over time, shape employee perceptions and strengthen trust.

Measuring Supervisor Engagement Through Leading Indicators

Because safety culture is shaped by daily behavior, companies should not rely only on lagging indicators such as injury rates or claims activity to understand whether supervisors are engaged. Those measures are important, but they describe outcomes after something has already happened. Leading indicators provide earlier insight into whether supervisors are actively influencing risk, reinforcing expectations and keeping safety visible before incidents occur.

Useful leading indicators should be simple, observable and tied to meaningful supervisory behavior. Companies might track supervisor-led safety contacts, quality of field observations, percentage of corrective actions closed on time, participation in pre-shift huddles, timely feedback on employee hazard reports, near-miss discussions initiated by supervisors, and documented coaching conversations related to safe work practices.

The quality of engagement matters as much as the count. A supervisor who completes many observations but offers little feedback may have less impact than one who has fewer, better conversations. Stronger indicators look at whether observations identify real hazards, whether employees are involved in problem solving, whether concerns are closed promptly, and whether supervisors recognize safe behaviors as well as correct unsafe ones.

When tracked consistently, these indicators help leaders see which supervisors are creating regular safety “touches” with their teams and where additional coaching may be needed. The goal is not to create a checklist exercise, but to give the organization a practical way to understand whether supervisors are present, engaged and reinforcing the safety culture the company expects.

Conclusion

Safety culture is built where work happens, and supervisors are at the center of that process. Their daily decisions determine whether safety remains a policy statement or becomes a practical value employees can see and trust.

By walking the talk, encouraging involvement, recognizing hazards and keeping safety in frequent conversation, supervisors create environments where people feel protected, respected and accountable.

By measuring leading indicators such as safety observations, hazard follow-up, coaching conversations and participation in daily safety discussions, companies can better understand whether supervisors are actively reinforcing the culture they expect.

A strong safety culture is not created in a training room or written into a manual. It is built one conversation, one decision and one example at a time and by supervisors who lead with consistency, credibility and purpose. ♦