



# Supervisors' Safety Update

Ideas and Strategies for Leaders



SSU 1999-09

## YOU AS THE SAFETY SUPERVISOR

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**A**s the person responsible for guiding and leading your employees, you are challenged with many obstacles. Your position as a supervisor not only takes into consideration your skills as a technician in your craft but also your ability to train, educate, coordinate, counsel, motivate and at times, discipline your employees. Thus, you may be referred to by many titles and may wear many hats.

*Consider one of your many titles as the Safety Supervisor. As the Safety Supervisor, your ability to accomplish the multitude of tasks required may be subject to many influences. However, by understanding and accepting basic risk and safety management philosophies, you will be able to make better decisions and achieve your goals and objectives.*

*Your success may depend greatly on whether or not your company supports the following ideas. Though these ideas may not guarantee your success it does lay the foundation for a management culture that can lead to greater and greener pastures.*

### Management Support

The support of senior management must be a requirement in order for you to be a successful Safety Supervisor. As an extension of senior management, you must be able to communicate their thoughts to your employees. Management support must extend beyond the customary attendance at safety meetings but also to active participation in operational activities where employees and supervisors can observe senior management "in action."

If unclear and ambiguous messages are sent from senior management, the result may be confused supervisors and employees. Morale may become an issue due to lack of direction and support. Quality and production may suffer as employees may become disenchanted with work at your company. Reported injuries or absenteeism may also rise as employees seek ways to "stay home" from work.

### Safe Production

The safety verses production myth must not exist. Safety, production as well as quality are inseparable. If safety and production is separated from one another, the result may be less (than expected) production and/or accidents. But to take that thought further, if safe production was **not** part of the operational process at the onset, the "higher" production goals that are expected may have been artificially achieved through unnecessary risk taking on the part of

the employee, supervisor or management. If safety is sidetracked for production shortcuts that save 15 minutes, but the employee is injured requiring 5-days of time-loss, *production and quality suffer* as well. As a supervisor, are you willing to take that risk with your employees? Is your company willing to take those risks?

Once a “safe culture” has been accomplished, higher production and quality goals can be set and achieved through increased efficiency of the whole work process.

Safe production is no more than doing the job the right way, all day, everyday. *Production is easier and quality is better when accidents are prevented.*

## The Impact of Accidents

When an accident occurs, the insurance company has the obligation to cover the medical, time-loss and a few other incidental costs associated with that accident. These reimbursements are sometimes called *Direct Costs*. However, those costs are just a small portion of the true cost associated with an accident. The other charges, sometimes called *Indirect or Hidden Costs*, are not covered under the workers’ compensation insurance policy.

Hidden costs may include, but are not limited to lost production, overtime charges, new employee training costs, administration time needed to investigate the accident, fines and citations, etc. The rule of thumb is that the hidden costs are anywhere from 4 to 10 times greater than that of the direct cost figures.

To illustrate this point further, consider an accident that occurred at your place of business. Count the amount of company employees who were involved with the accident and the time spent because of this accident. The listing below includes just some of the people and events that may be impacted when an accident occurs.

- Supervisor(s) who investigated the accident and reported it to personnel.
- Employees who witnessed and reported the accident. Consider the time spent to interview those witnesses. Those employees as well as others may not return to full production after the accident due to a variety of reasons.
- Personnel department employees who complete and submit all required forms.
- Safety director who investigates the accident.
- Maintenance personnel used to clean the area or repair damages.
- Senior management who reviews the accident reports and meets with the supervisor of that department.
- Personnel department staff used to hire and train a replacement employee.
- Supervisor used to train the replacement employee.
- Supervisor used to closely monitor replacement employee.
- Slowed production due to unskilled replacement employee.

Considering the hidden costs of accidents, it is clear that not only the severe accidents cost you dollars but also the smaller, less serious accidents. Controlling the frequency of accidents, no matter how severe they are, goes a long way towards controlling the ultimate cost of accidents and therefore the financial success of a company.

## **New Employee Safety Orientation and Monitoring**

Historically, employees who are new to the job have suffered more accidents than those who are experienced. As the Safety Supervisor, your responsibility is to ensure that the new employee is properly indoctrinated to the job and has a clear understanding of the hazards associated with the job. The new employee must also have a clear understanding of what management is expecting as it relates to the position.

The opportunity to interview the new employee may not be available. In effect, you must conduct your own mini-interview at your level prior to releasing the employee to the work environment. The following discussion points may assist you with conducting your own interview. The expectations discussed and information presented during the orientation should include, but is not limited to:

- A description of the new job and its rules. Communicate what is expected of the new employee from an operational standpoint.
- Show the worker around the site or yard.
- Ask specific questions about the worker's past experience to find out about his/her qualifications.
- Discuss the job specific hazards and control methods used to minimize or prevent exposure.
- Give a hands-on demonstration in the use of safety equipment including the various forms of personal protective equipment.
- Give the worker a test run on applicable equipment and/or tools. Don't just take their word that they know how to operate the tools or equipment.
- Introduce the worker to other employees.
- Slowly let the new employee get accustomed with the work process. Carefully observe the new employee.
- Immediately correct any unwanted behavior.
- Encourage other employees to watch out for their new co-worker.

By conducting a thorough New Employee Safety Orientation, you will be greatly assisting the employee in being a safe, productive and successful worker at your company.

## **Accident Reporting and Investigation**

Some people may think that accidents are just a fact of life. Others understand that while accidents do happen, they are preventable. Whatever your belief currently is, if and when an accident does occur, quick action and decisions must be made to ensure that the injured employee is cared for properly. Once this is done, the accident report should be filled out. By having all accidents immediately reported the effectiveness of the investigative and corrective process is maximized.

The purpose of the investigation is to ensure that all the facts are uncovered and the true cause or root cause of the accident is identified. Upon identifying the cause of the accident, steps must be taken to prevent similar accidents from happening again. Those corrective steps must be communicated to the employees and closely monitored for effectiveness. If they are not working, make changes to the original corrective steps, communicate the changes and continue monitoring.

Safety professionals estimate that approximately 80% - 90% of all accidents are due to unsafe acts or behavior. During the investigative process, do not solely concentrate on physical conditions but also look into other behavioral factors that may have contributed to the accident. Also, remember accident investigation is fact finding and not fault finding.

*Near misses* or "close calls" must also be reported and investigated with the same vigor, purpose and thinking as an injury producing accident.

## **Safety Meetings**

Communication is the key to understanding. Miscommunication between parties may result in everyone moving towards different goals or targets. Safety meetings are just another mechanism to ensure that communication is flowing between all.

It is very important for supervisors to meet regularly with their employees to discuss the various aspects of job safety as it relates to the operation. It is only through face-to-face contact that effective communication on the subject can take place. Attempt to personalize the meetings using real-life situations that the employees can relate to. The open, informal atmosphere of a small group meeting encourages the kind of questions and discussions that “personalize” the issue of safety by focusing on its day to day applications.

Safety meetings can serve a multitude of purposes:

- They encourage safety awareness among employees.
- They allow employee feedback on issues that are not normally discussed during “production time.”
- They can motivate employees to follow proper safety practices, to help eliminate safety hazards.
- They introduce workers to new safety equipment and preventative practices.
- They provide a forum to share vital information on accident causes.

## **Self-Observations and Evaluations**

Self-inspections as they are normally called, suggest that businesses look at their operation to identify and correct any hazards that are found. However, the typical safety inspection walk-through of an operation or facility may not allow you the time to stop and observe employees at work. As stated earlier, 80% - 90% of all accidents and mishaps occur due to unsafe acts or behavior. Thus, the self-observation and evaluation must focus more on what the employee is doing rather than the physical condition of that ladder or power cord.

Continuous observations and evaluations must be done. Corrective action must be taken immediately upon noticing safety problems or issues. The why’s and how’s must also be discussed with the person involved. Documentation of your findings must be made and filed accordingly. If an item cannot be corrected immediately, note who would be responsible to correct the problem and what would be a reasonable correction date.

Other forms of self-observations and evaluations may be utilized in addition to the supervisor walk-through. Each department supervisor may be required to inspect their own work place and the equipment or machinery that is used on a daily basis to report discrepancies. Safety committees or special committees may be used for periodic or special observations.

Finally, give each and every employee the ability and authority to identify and communicate any unsafe situation. Encourage participation and provide positive feedback when issues are brought to your attention. A lack of feedback from you may result in an employee who may perceive that safety is not important to you.

## **Discipline**

Rules, procedures, programs and policies will not be effective or successful without discipline. Consequences for not following company policy should be clearly communicated to everyone throughout the company.

As a Safety Supervisor, you are tasked with the responsibility of observing your employees on the front line. Your direct link to management and front line employees makes your role even more critical in ensuring that your workers are following company rules and moving towards the same goal. Should the company rules and procedures be disregarded, you must be able to quickly access the situation and enforce your discipline policy.

Double standards, applying discipline only on selected employees or situations, is possibly one of the worst situations a company could make in company policy. Employees who observe the double standard in action may begin to question the integrity, honesty and fairness of the company. The application of the double standard only breeds contempt among employees.

## **Criminal Liability**

Complying with state and federal safety regulations is serious business. Every employee whether manager, safety & health professional, or line worker has a degree of accountability for compliance with safety and health regulations. Managers are becoming more and more vulnerable to criminal lawsuits. The possibility of a jail sentence for violating health and safety laws is not just speculation. As accountability is working down the chain of command, fines and penalties are climbing.

Companies have the responsibility to establish safety and health programs in accordance with federal and state laws as well as to follow the safety practices for their particular industry. Managers are vulnerable when they deviate from the safety requirement and an employee is seriously injured or killed. Former President Bush signed Federal legislation known as the “OSHA Criminal Penalty Reform Act” into law. The bill increases the current OSHA penalty for a willful violation resulting in death, from 6 months in prison to **10-years** in prison for a first offense. The penalty for a second offense could be a **20-year** jail term. The bill also provides punishment for willful violations that result in serious bodily injury with a maximum penalty of **5-years** in prison for a first offense and **10-years** for a second offense in addition to federal prosecution.

This legislation preserves the ability of state and local authorities to prosecute these cases under state and local criminal laws as well. It is interesting to note that the legislation makes clear that individual officers, directors, and agents of the employer who are found guilty of these crimes will not be able to rely on corporate assets to pay imposed fines. In other words, your personal assets may also be at risk.

Being a Safety Supervisor should not be perceived as a Production Supervisor with added safety responsibilities. Operationally, safety has always been incorporated into what everyone does. As a supervisor, you must handle all situations with your department and crew that effect production, safety and quality. Your safety management philosophies and actions will determine whether or not you are successful at being a Safety Supervisor.