Excerpt from Selling Safety, Lessons From a Former Front Line Supervisor

Introduction

Safety should be like every other aspect of the business when it comes to how it is managed. Expectations based on a vision, mission and objectives should be clearly defined and communicated. A system of accountability should be in place, as well as key upstream and downstream metrics to determine if progress is being made. The problem is that we often try to manage safety differently. We use an authoritarian style that focuses on compliance with governmental regulations. Investigations focus on the employee's behavior rather than the system or process. When the root cause is identified as "failed to follow procedures," we use disciplinary action to punish the transgressor. Then we retrain everyone, which is often viewed as a form of punishment. Games and giveaways are used as a reward or simply to keep their attention as if we are afraid they might wander off. Banners with safety slogans are hung throughout the work area where they eventually collect dust and become obsolete.

I know because that is how I managed safety as a supervisor. That was my approach because it was how I was taught, and besides, everyone else took the same approach. After all, I am the supervisor so "it can't be my fault." If it is not my fault it must be the fault of that poor employee that was involved in the incident. I was only following the corporate Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) for incidents that called for progressive disciplinary action.

At least it was clear, but also clearly wrong, as I would find out years down the road. It is little wonder managers and safety professionals alike have difficulty getting employees to do what we want them to do. Much has changed since I was a supervisor almost three decades ago, but surprisingly, I still see some of these same tactics used today. These tactics encourage compliance, but stifle creativity and initiative. "I'm just doing my job," rather than "I see a hazard and I'm going to correct it."

This book is based on my experience with safety as an hourly employee, front-line supervisor who wore safety as one of many hats, a full-time safety professional for two Fortune 200 companies and the federal government and now as a safety consultant.

There were three pivotal events in my working career that shaped my approach to safety and the tools I use. I will share the story of those events with you because it provides some context to the lessons I learned. The lessons learned are based primarily on my experience, but also on teachings from current-day thought leaders inside and outside the safety field.

SAFETY IS A POSITIVE (From Chapter 9 Knowledge; Know What They Want Most)

I am the supervisor, so it can't be my fault, so it must be your fault. Since this is your first offense, I have to put a letter in your file. On your next offense, I have to send you home for 1 day and put another letter in your file.

– Me, as a front-line supervisor explaining the disciplinary action policy to an employee for a safety violation

Dale Carnegie (1936) in his book *How to Win Friends and Influence People* said, "Any fool can criticize, condemn and complain – and most fools do." Nothing kills enthusiasm or ambitions like criticism or blame, yet too often we look for blame after an accident. We then view disciplinary action as a corrective action. By doing so, we turn a potentially positive environment into a negative environment. Or you might view it as compounding an already negative situation by focusing on the employee's behavior. We then compound the problem again by punishing the employee with disciplinary action.

Another universal want is to work in an environment that is positive. Where positive attitudes prevail, people work together and successes are celebrated. The work itself may not be fun, but working in a positive environment can make up for boring or difficult jobs.

Unfortunately, failures and mistakes are easier to spot than successes. Also, successes are expected. That is what everyone is paid for, right? Why praise success? Failures are a different story. We identify mistakes and believe we are correcting a problem. In reality, we are reinforcing safety as a negative and creating a negative environment. Working in a negative safety environment makes other negatives about the job more difficult to overlook. The flip side is that positive emotions and attitudes are contagious and resonate throughout your area of influence.

According to Dan Petersen's *10 Basic Principles of Safety Management* (2001, p. 15, exhibit 2.3), "There is no one right way to achieve safety in an organization; however, for a safety system to be effective, it must meet certain criteria. The system must in part 'be perceived as positive.'"

Many employees have a preconceived negative notion about safety because of past experiences, just as I had for so many years. One of the core tenets in Dale Carnegie's (1936) book *How to Win Friends and Influence People* is that it is possible to change other people's

behavior by changing one's behavior toward them. We must first have a positive attitude about safety. Be enthusiastic about safety and do not let anyone bring us down. If the supervisor has a positive attitude about safety, more likely the employee will too.

By translating features of a strong safety program into benefits we create a positive attitude about safety. For example, talk about incidents as an opportunity to identify a breakdown in the process and make an improvement. We do not follow lockout tagout procedures because it is a regulation, but because it helps to ensure everyone goes home with the same number of fingers they came to work with.

I am not saying we should attempt to put a positive spin on a serious incident, but we should seek to understand why it happened and not look to manage through disciplinary action.

Everyone wants to be appreciated for their efforts and their contributions however small, as previously noted. Yet too often, we are quick to apply disciplinary action when an infraction occurs. We pull out that "read and sign" document we dutifully filed away three years ago when the employee was hired. It shows we did our job and the employee is at fault. I am not saying "read and signs" do not have any benefit or are not needed. The benefit comes in how we use them. Too often, we use them for disciplinary action purposes or to cover our own backsides.

To create a more positive atmosphere around safety, start by focusing the investigation on the management system or process that broke down and allowed the error to occur. Look for multiple causation rather than one simple act or condition. That is why I never use the term "root cause," because it insinuates that there is only one cause, "*the* root cause."

When an effort is made to identify all contributing factors, we may find other causes of operational errors, and we send a message that a breakdown in management systems may be at fault and not just the employee.

As a safety professional, I learned to effectively use this litmus test when pushed to consider disciplinary action for a safety infraction.

1. Is there a documented procedure that covers the situation? I don't mean "Yeah, we mentioned it in a shift briefing." I mean a documented, formal standard that is reviewed and updated on a routine basis.

2. Is there formal training associated with the procedure? Formal training can be classroom, computer-based training, or even a shift briefing, but key learning points and attendance should be documented.

3. Is the procedure effectively communicated? "Read and signs" do not count for much when they go back into the employee's file. Various communication methods should be used. Examples may include: posting on the company safety portal, newsletters, tailgate briefing, memos posted on bulletin boards. Each taken by itself has minimal impact at best, so look for multiple messages over a period of time. Multiple messages are even more critical for infrequent tasks.

4. Is the procedure or are key training points reinforced? Reinforcement comes through observations, inspections, audits and recognition. Yes, recognition. How many times have you recognized an individual or group for a specific behavior or procedure that was followed? If you recognized an individual, did you share it with the team so they know what behaviors are celebrated?.

5. Did you measure compliance with the procedure? Can you say based on documented facts that compliance is at 50% or 60% or 75%?

By asking these questions, you are determining if expectations are clear, understood and reinforced. If you answered "No" to any of these questions, even one question, you have a management system issue that must be addressed. If you answered "Yes" to all questions then you have a personnel issue and the file should be turned over to your Human Resources representative or department head for action.

Accountability is essential in all aspects of business, but particularly for safety. Unfortunately, accountability too often is synonymous with blame and negative consequences. To build a positive atmosphere, safety should never be involved with, associated with or linked to disciplinary action. Create that positive atmosphere by defining your safety program by its merits.