

THE SUPERVISOR A Key Ally to Workplace Safety

By Matt Phillips

In the business of safety, every safety professional who has been in the field long enough knows that effective safety leadership is a critical skill that any current or would-be supervisor can and must master.

The supervisor is a vital link and key ally to safety on the job, playing a critical role in driving safety success among team members. If not properly aligned with management goals and the message of safety leadership, however, supervision can directly or indirectly contribute to eroding the confidence of team members in the safety process when misalignment between safety and production expectations occur.

Safety professionals have the unique responsibility to help set up supervisors for success. We must help guide them to become change agents. The value of the supervisor's role as the driver of safety and risk in the field cannot be overstated. Supervisors must provide a consistent, knowledgeable and actionable message of safety in the field. After all, what is the goal? Quicker production? Always being right? If these are the goals of supervisors, then safety professionals have a lot of work ahead of them. However, if a supervisor's goals are aligned with safety leadership in ensuring that the top value is the preservation of life and property, and this is backed up by demonstration of those values in the field, this lays the groundwork for sustained safety and risk success. If a supervisor's leadership style is geared toward the former, it is never too late to help guide that supervisor in the direction of the latter. To do this, however, safety professionals must always model the way. Supervisors cannot be effective advocates for their teams when it comes to employee safety and health if they are not shown how to be.

How can safety professionals help spur this change among supervisors? While many methods exist, the author has found that focusing on and demonstrating seven foundational principles in interactions with supervision are among the most effective.

Keeping these seven principles at the forefront of all of your interactions with supervision will help ensure that, from top to bottom, the organization is aligned for success.

Principle 1: Do What You Say You Will Do

In the eyes of the employee, your commitment to safety is not measured by what you say, but rather by what you do. If work-

ers perceive you as being all words and no action, they are less likely to believe you are committed to safety, making you an unreliable ally in ensuring safety on the job. Employees appreciate honesty, integrity, impartiality and consistency. Even if their concern is at low risk of causing an incident, employees will appreciate that you have taken the time to listen, understand the concern, review it, and provide feedback or resolution. When someone brings a concern or issue forward, the expectation is that you will act on it quickly. Do not dismiss the concern, ignore it or immediately invalidate it.

Some situations require use of additional skills, outlined in this article, but the first step is to gain team members' trust and respect, and to treat all concerns as legitimate until proven otherwise. Commit to investigating the problem and determining a solution. Do what you say you will do. Quick action, either to correct the issue or to review it to determine a temporary or long-term solution, goes a long way and is appreciated by all employees.

Principle 2: Listen

Some would argue that listening is the most vital skill that a safety professional must possess when it comes to any kind of success, let alone safety success. Listening is an emphasized skill at every level, and many people believe they know how to listen. But do they? Consider this common scenario: A team member walks into your office to discuss a safety issue. As the worker presents their concern, you check your phone, continue typing the last bit of an email, or try to multitask because of an impending deadline, not providing the proper level of attention to the concern. You may be hearing what is said, but you are not listening.

Listening requires active engagement. Given the demands of the modern work environment, time is precious and we must make conscious choices as to how we manage that time. But when it comes to safety and employees' concerns, it is imperative to listen, not simply hear. Failure to listen can erode a person's confidence not only in you, but also in your commitment and ability to address situations throughout the organization.

While that scenario is undesirable as a supervisor or safety professional, in the worst case, failure to listen can lead to much worse. Listening and applying that listening are critical to building trust with employees and helping ensure that you set them up for safety and risk success, not place them in the way of harm.

Principle 3: Get Out & Look

Being labeled a "desk jockey" by employees does not help you represent safety and risk excellence. The amount of desk work required in many roles may make it difficult to spend time in the field, but team members will notice your absence.

While active listening is key to understanding an employee's point of view, truly understanding the situation requires seeing it firsthand. When a worker presents a situation, offer to go look at the problem together. Photos, reports, video and other methods of communication all help and are solid tools to help gain understanding, but there are always nuances to a concern that cannot be captured using these methods alone. It is much easier to describe a solution to a problem you have physically seen, as well as give you the employee's perspective of why the situation is unsafe and needs attention.

Principle 4: Empathize

Most people have been in the situation of bringing a potentially touchy issue or concern to a supervisor. The situation does not even have to be safety related. It is difficult for team members to bring such issues forward, especially if there is a perceived negative consequence to their concern. Put yourself in their shoes. How would you feel if you were the one raising the concern? You would want your boss to care about your concerns; employees feel the same way. If you respond poorly, team members may close off and go around you for resolution, which to a supervisor can have an isolating effect.

The phrase "you can't understand someone until you've walked a mile in their shoes" is accurate with respect to safety and risk mitigation. Understanding where an individual is coming from, what they have dealt with in the past and how



those interactions have molded their current way of thinking helps identify all of the factors involved in the situation and can be used to help plot a course forward.

Early in my career, I once sat for an hour with a 30-year welder who pointed out all the things wrong with safety and how management was not committed to safety like they said they were. While most of his comments were said in the heat of the moment, he made many legitimate points. Toward the end of the discussion, I demonstrated to him that I had heard what he said and stated that, while I could not atone for what had occurred in the past, I could promise that things would be done differently moving forward. From that day on, through empathizing, as well as use of the first three principles, I gained a powerful ally in helping to improve our safety programs. The worker's direct contributions to the effort helped us avoid a number of injuries and events that we may not have known of otherwise. Empathy is powerful.

Principle 5: Communicate

Communication involves both verbal and nonverbal cues. Body language can say more to a team member than anything said verbally. If you are presented with a situation and respond by rolling your eyes or heavily sighing, you are sending a message you may regret. Other cues such as a short response, sharp tone or expression of agitation will make you seem indifferent or unwilling to participate in a conversation. The employee is bringing this concern to you because they feel it is important. The person would likely prefer not to have to bring it to you at all—it was not part of their plan for the day. Present a tone of openness and interest so you hear the whole story and can win an ally in ensuring that future issues are brought forward.

It is also important to communicate back to team members on the status of an issue. Do not simply take the issue and run. Update personnel periodically until the situation is resolved. Team members may appreciate this more than an actual resolution to a safety concern because it demonstrates your commitment to reaching a resolution.

There is no better example of how lack of communication can contribute to a breakdown in safety and risk practice in the field as when a policy or practice in the field changes and the change is not effectively communicated. A good example of this is demonstrated in the case of a change in a lockout/tagout step that was not communicated by the supervisor to the employee. The supervisor had identified that the wrong disconnect on the wrong piece of equipment had been added to the record, but failed to

communicate the change to the employee applying the lockout. During execution of the work prior to equipment repair, a subsequent walk down to verify the isolation points revealed the error. While no one was injured and no equipment loss occurred, because the supervisor failed to effectively communicate the change, the employee placed the isolation on the wrong point, setting up the individuals working on the equipment to be exposed to a potentially hazardous situation.

Immediate, effective, direct two-way communication (i.e., supervisor says it, employee repeats it, supervisor verifies what was repeated is correct) is the best method for ensuring that all relevant information has been relayed to team members and that they understand what is expected. Without effective communication, you could be setting yourself and employees up for much more serious consequences down the line that may impact others and erode the trust your team places in you to keep them and their coworkers out of harm's way.

Principle 6: Give Timely Feedback

Providing effective and constructive feedback is a key to success. The individuals you work with are skilled craftspeople who take pride in their work and understand what must be done. But sometimes, even the best among us can benefit from effective and constructive feedback. Lombardo and Eichinger (2006) identify that people need continuous feedback to grow. Feedback must also be accurate and honest. It must be real time and should be given in as much time as you have to provide it.

Feedback should be process oriented as much as possible. This helps consistency, allowing team members to better achieve a goal. Feedback demonstrates that what they are doing is important and that your goal is to help, not to play "gotcha." The goal is not to catch someone doing something wrong; instead, it is to identify a situation that could contribute to an incident or safety event and provide feedback that will help change the outcome of the situation for the better.

We have all likely seen or engaged with a supervisor or a safety professional who was on the job to observe the task, but who either never provided feedback only about what was wrong, and did not discuss suggestions for correcting identified at risk items. Immediate feedback could be the last chance you have to

prevent an incident from occurring. It is recommended that feedback always start with a positive discussion, become constructive, then end on the positive. Providing feedback in this manner will help create safety engagement and a positive perception as well.

Principle 7: Be Humble

No one knows everything or has mastered every process. While it is your obligation to seek knowledge to improve your skills, it is not a sign of weakness to admit what you do not know. People respect when a person knows their limitations. However, they do not respect when they know you are making up an answer to save face, show that you know the answer when you don't, or provide an answer to suppress conversation. If you don't know, you don't know—that's the bottom line.

Show humility and admit that you do not know, but then do what you can to find the answer. Draw on your team members. Their experiences vary and they can provide a wealth of information that will benefit everyone on the team. Involve the team and allow them to speak up. Engage team members in two-way dialogue and keep these lines open. A person who can admit to their flaws but who is also willing to learn from them and can provide answers is a reliable safety advocate.

Conclusion

Safety is critical to our overall success in any workplace. It is a deeply held value from management on down. Success in safety depends on effective safety leadership from the person who can help affect safety the most: the supervisor. As safety professionals, providing and demonstrating these skills to supervisors every day can help achieve effectiveness in promoting safety and will lead to sustained safety success within the organization. Supervisors are the critical link in safety success or failure. **PSJ**

References

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