

MORE THAN A CHECKLIST

Creating a Proactive Safety Culture With VPP

By Joe Keenan

OSHA's Voluntary Protection Programs (VPP) designation is the highest recognition of safety and health excellence that OSHA presents to a facility. For this designation, OSHA, management and labor form a collaborative partnership to achieve a world-class safety standard.

Simply put, VPP is not just about meeting OSHA standards; it is about exceeding them by building a workplace where safety becomes second nature and employees proactively address safety issues. According to OSHA, the statistical evidence of VPP effectiveness for reducing injuries and illnesses at participant worksites is impressive. The average VPP worksite had a days away restricted or transferred (DART) case rate of 53% below the average for its industry for non-construction participants and 60% below the average for site-based construction and mobile workforce participation for 2020 (OSHA, n.d.). To meet the OSHA VPP requirements, all four major elements and sub-elements must be met: management leadership and employee involvement, worksite analysis, hazard prevention and control, and safety and health training.

VPP Elements

Management Leadership & Employee Involvement

Creating a world-class safety culture requires leadership and employees working together. Management commitment provides the motivating force behind a successful safety program. Leaders must demonstrate their own dedication to safety by providing resources, setting

clear expectations, and holding themselves and others accountable.

Employee involvement is the true heart-beat of safety. When employees know their voices matter, they become actively engaged in keeping themselves and their co-workers safe. Strong leadership and active employee engagement go hand in hand—one does not work without the other.

Worksite Analysis

Worksite analysis is all about staying ahead of potential hazards in the workplace. It involves routinely examining the workplace to identify not only existing hazards but also changes in processes, equipment or conditions that could introduce new latent hazards.

Effective management takes a proactive approach, constantly evaluating tasks and environments to anticipate and prevent incidents before they occur.

Hazard Prevention & Control

Effective hazard prevention follows a simple rule: Find it, fix it. When a hazard is identified, it should be addressed immediately. If the issue cannot be fixed right away, equipment or processes should be taken out of service until the problem is resolved (e.g., lockout/tagout).

The best approach to controlling hazards follows OSHA's hierarchy of

controls: Start with engineering controls to eliminate the hazard, use administrative controls to manage exposure, and rely on PPE only as a last resort.

Safety & Health Training

Effective safety training goes beyond compliance. It gives employees the knowledge and confidence to recognize hazards and respond appropriately. Everyone has a role to play, so training should clearly outline safety responsibilities for frontline workers, supervisors and managers alike.

The most impactful training programs integrate safety concepts into broader job and performance training. By linking safety to everyday tasks, employees are more likely to retain key information and apply it in real-world situations.

Practical Tips for Achieving VPP Certification

Achieving VPP certification requires more than just meeting OSHA standards; it takes consistent action and building strong employee engagement. One of the most effective ways to build that engagement is by making safety part of everyday conversations. Successful sites train supervisors to start their shifts with a simple safety talk—not a lecture, just a 2-minute check-in. For example, one site had supervisors start each morning by asking employees, "What are you doing today that could cause someone to get hurt?" This small step uncovered hazards such as damaged extension cords, blocked exits and missing machine guards that otherwise might have been missed. It also showed employees that their input mattered, which encouraged them to stay actively engaged. This was a supplemental activity to formalized daily safety toolbox talks.

Another effective strategy is creating a strong near-miss reporting system. One site set up easy-to-spot near-miss reporting stations in break rooms and busy areas. Employees can fill out a card in seconds if they spot a hazard or unsafe behavior. To encourage participation, the site holds monthly drawings for those who submit reports. The site follows up on reports

PRACTICAL STEPS TO SUPPORT VPP CERTIFICATION

- **Start every shift with a quick safety talk.** Encourage supervisors to lead brief, 2-minute safety conversations to identify potential hazards and show employees their input matters.
- **Promote near-miss reporting with visible stations.** Set up easy-to-access reporting areas and offer incentives like monthly drawings to boost participation and early hazard detection.
- **Implement a closed-loop work order system.** Track all reported safety concerns with assigned responsibilities, public updates, and employee sign-off to ensure accountability and resolution.
- **Create a safety best practice program.** Encourage employees to share safety improvement ideas and recognize the best ones publicly to foster engagement and innovation.
- **Integrate safety into training.** Go beyond compliance by connecting safety practices to daily tasks for all roles, increasing retention and real-world application.
- **Conduct regular, proactive worksite analysis.** Continuously assess the workplace for new or changing hazards and act swiftly to mitigate risks before incidents occur.

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immediately, and employees see that their concerns are immediately addressed, which keeps them motivated to continue reporting. Over time, this approach shifted the safety culture from reactive to proactive, identifying and addressing potential issues before they turned into incidents.

An effective safety best practice is implementing a closed-loop work order system, which is a powerful tool that builds trust and accountability. At successful VPP sites, every reported safety concern is tracked from start to finish. When an employee identifies a hazard—whether a frayed extension cord or a missing guard—it is logged with due dates and responsibilities and is publicly posted for visibility. Once resolved, the employee who reported the safety concern signs off to confirm that the issue has been corrected to their satisfaction. If the employee is not satisfied, the concern stays open until the issue meets expectations. This process ensures that everything is addressed and shows employees that their concerns are taken seriously. One site that implemented this system saw a significant increase in employee

participation and engagement because workers knew that their voices mattered.

Finally, establishing a safety best practice program is an excellent way to improve employee engagement and drive continuous improvement. These programs actively encourage employees to share ideas that improve overall safety processes. One VPP site launched a safety spotlight board where employees posted ideas that successfully reduced risks. Each month, the best idea was recognized in front of the team, and several ideas even became part of the facility's official safety procedures. This type of recognition not only builds pride but also reinforces the idea that everyone has a role in improving safety.

Conclusion

Combining strategies such as engaging in meaningful safety conversations, encouraging near-miss reporting,

establishing a closed-loop work order system, and implementing a safety best practice program creates a strong framework for building employee trust and accountability. These steps are not complicated, but they require consistency and commitment, which are what separate successful VPP sites from the rest. Remember, the OSHA standards are a minimum requirement. The main idea behind VPP is to go above and beyond. **PSJ**

References

OSHA. (n.d.). Modernizing OSHA's voluntary protection programs. <https://bit.ly/45aupnt>

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