

Employee Engagement & Organizational Safety Performance

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Engagement breathes life into a safety process and enables the particulars of an organization's objectives to be realized and sustained. A culture that inspires behavioral reliability is especially critical in dispersed workforces, where employees are required to act regularly without supervision. This article describes the principles that underlie effective employee engagement in safety, the crucial role of leadership in creating the right environment, and considerations for how engagement fits within the bigger picture of comprehensive safety improvement.

The Rules of Engagement: Understanding Social Exchange theory

Creating the kind of culture where we go longer periods of time without injuries – and where no injury is acceptable – is a serious undertaking. In particular, it requires engagement, the willing and active participation of employees throughout the organization. At the end of the day, leadership is limited in its ability to provide coverage and even with the best safety programs are only as effective as the level of employee buy-in and support for these systems. The defining mark of an injury-free culture is what's called the "2 AM test". That is, what happens at 2 o'clock in the morning when no one is around, the consultants are long gone, and the managers have all gone home. Even if no one will know, does the employee follow procedures and guidelines because it is the right thing to do? In a culture of engagement, the answer is likely to be yes.

What compels the employee in the 2 am test to act in concert with the organization's stated objectives? In our experience true engagement is more than empowerment simply. Being able or allowed to do something is important, but is not sufficient for true engagement in the safety process. The active participation, exchange of ideas, and ownership necessary for putting safety systems into action draws on something deeper than rules or protocol. This level of engagement is a function of relationships that exist within the organization.

Social Exchange theory explains how our relationship with another person, or with the

organization as a whole, influences our actions with respect to that person or entity. How much we put into a relationship is dependent on what we get out of it; our feeling about the kind of relationship we feel we deserve and whether we sense that we could do better in another relationship. Simply put, healthy relationships have a natural give and take; if you do something for someone, they feel a sense that they should reciprocate. The more you do for someone (or the more they do for you) the stronger the feeling of reciprocity.

Engagement begins when organizations establish their concern for the employee, assuring that supervisors treat workers in an unbiased and fair manner and with dignity and respect. They also do this when they assure that the senior leadership and the organization demonstrates its concern for employees' well being. These things establish a good relationship with employees and foster a strong sense of reciprocity. In this environment employees tend to go above and beyond their job description because they feel it is the right thing to do for a peer, leadership or the organization. This willingness to follow a procedure, even when no one is watching or to step up and take on leadership in the moment is a sign of a very high functioning organization.

Conversely, when employees feel no sense of connection to the organization or its leaders we cannot expect safety activities to flourish. Instead, the organization will likely meet resistance in trying to implement new programs or systems that require employee engagement.

Leadership, Engagement & Culture

Whether engagement come easily or is almost impossible to achieve depends on the atmosphere – the safety climate and organizational culture — that leadership creates. When these things are right, engagement becomes easy. What then constitutes the right environment? And what specific things do leaders need to do to in order to allow engagement and motivation to thrive?

There are several culture dimensions critical to high performance in safety, which can be grouped

into team, safety-specific, and organizational dimensions. Of these, the scales belonging to the organizational dimension are the most fundamental to setting the stage for engagement:

Procedural Justice

This dimension reflects the extent to which the individual perceives fairness in the supervisor's decision-making process. Leaders enhance perceptions of procedural justice when they make decisions characterized by consistency across persons and time, lack of bias, accuracy (decisions are based on good information and informed opinion), correctableness (decisions can be appealed), representativeness (the procedure reflects the concerns, values and outlook of those affected), and ethicality.

Leader-Member Exchange

This dimension reflects the relationship the employee has with his or her supervisor. In particular, this scale measures the employee's level of confidence that his or her supervisor will go to bat for him and look out for his interests. Leaders can enhance perceptions of leader-member exchange by developing positive working relationships with their reports and getting each person to see how achieving organizational goals as fulfilling to both the leader and to himself.

Management Credibility

This dimension reflects the perception of the employee that what management says is consistent with what management does. Leader behaviors that influence perceptions of trustworthiness include consistency, integrity (telling the truth, keeping promises), sharing control in decision-making and through delegation, communication, and benevolence (demonstration of concern).

Perceived Organizational Support

This dimension describes the perception of employees that the organization cares about them, values them, and supports them. The extent to which employees believe the organization is concerned with their needs and interests strongly influences their likelihood that they will go the extra mile. Leaders can demonstrate organizational support by effecting and communicating efforts that go well beyond what is required.

These factors form a foundation on which engagement and motivation, as well as the other critical cultural characteristics, are based. Three of

these factors (Leader-Member Exchange, Management Credibility, and Perceived Organizational Support) can be understood from social exchange theory. If an employee is treated with dignity and respect and offered support by his or her supervisor, the likelihood increases that the employee will reciprocate; job performance, extra-role behavior, and loyalty will tend to increase. On the other hand, if the worker feels demeaned or disrespected, he is much less likely to fully engage in the work.

Engagement starts with a core group of leaders who have influence over the organization and who get aligned on what they really value, and what principles represent those values. Then they need to know what behaviors of theirs are necessary to convey to the organization that they are serious about change and to stimulate the right behaviors among other leaders. There must be consistency across leadership on saying and doing the right things: making the right decisions, communicating the right information, and articulating the right vision. When they do this, they immediately change the safety climate into one in which engagement becomes easy. And they begin the process of transforming the culture into one that fosters motivation for safety excellence.

Engagement & Safety Improvement: Three Ways to Engage Employees

Engagement by definition means active participation. While there are a variety of ways to deploy engagement, there are three basic activities through which employees can support optimal safety performance:

1. Provide information and feedback about the organization's systems and efforts.

Workers are the customer for most of the safety systems we are installing and they are the ones who must comply with the various procedures and rules the organization implements. Workers can tell us a great deal about how effective these systems are and what issues prevent their successful execution. In order to tap this information, we need to create an environment where workers can upwardly communicate about safety concerns and the challenges they face.

Employees must believe that someone is listening to information they pass along and that organizational leaders will actually act on this information. Lacking a sense of reciprocity, the employee has no compelling reason to provide constructive input. For example, if the employee does

not feel connected to the organization or his or her boss, or if he has tried to upwardly communicate about safety before and gotten “beaten down” or seen that nothing happens with information passed along, the employee is less inclined to speak up.

How to make it work

With the exception of totally dysfunctional cultures, organizations can gather information from employees about what works and what doesn't formally through a combination of diagnostic tools, focus groups and interviews, and informally through one-on-one discussions. There is one caveat to this activity, however. Once we as leaders seek feedback, we must share the findings, no matter how abysmal they may be, and be prepared to take action.

2. Support measurement and management of exposure at the working interface.

Perhaps the greatest opportunity for engagement is having workers measure the level of exposure at the working interface. Employees at the floor level add to the sets of eyes and ears focused on understanding the level of exposure and on the reasons (immediate and root cause) that an unacceptable level of exposure exists. The most common methodologies used for engaging employees here are observation and feedback systems. Traditional behavior-based safety approaches are a move in this direction but often focus too narrowly on behavior, instead of the broader picture of exposure.

How to make it work

A robust and rewarding engagement system needs to include a broad focus on exposure, emphasize the positive aspects of the working interface, and capture causation. There are two caveats to this approach. First, supervisors and managers cannot abdicate their responsibility to do their own measurement of the working interface. This is especially true of their responsibility to review and assess exposures that represent high potential for life altering injuries or death, systems related to process safety management and key permits and procedures. Second, the organization needs to be sensitive to the level of acceptance within the existing culture for employees approaching one another about safety. Where this approach would be counter-cultural, the system can be modified to accommodate the culture.

3. Partner with them in identifying solutions to safety problems.

The final area for effective engagement is enlisting employees in helping to fix problems. Most

organizations already have enough problem identifiers. What is needed are people willing to tackle the challenges. Workers are operating the equipment, handling the product, and working the systems and therefore ideally positioned to help identify solutions. As an added benefit, employees are more likely to support changes in which they, or their coworkers, have had a say.

How to make it work

In many organizations, engaging employees in identifying solutions offers an important opportunity for cross-functional and cross-level collaboration. As with measuring and managing exposure, it is important that leaders not abdicate their role (for instance, leaving it all to front-line employees) and that they clearly communicate the decision making process.

Creating Engagement

Employee engagement takes a well defined strategy of what it will look like in the organization and how it will be communicated. Ultimately, engagement is a function of leadership. Leaders must understand the specific mechanisms that drive safety performance, the action points that will engage each level in running and supporting these safety systems, and finally, how their own decisions, beliefs, communications, and actions (their personal engagement) enable motivation.

In addition, the organization must be prepared for the commitment that engagement requires and must understand the impact engagement will have on the front-line leader. Employees may need time away from their “normal” duties to participate in safety, placing an additional burden on leaders still faced with production demands. Engagement can also be threatening to some in the organization and completely misunderstood by others. Some leaders may see employee engagement as competing with their power and authority. Other might see this as a chance to stop working on safety, since the “employees will be handling it.” These and other issues need to be considered and addressed when planning forward. Done well, however, engagement puts safety strategy into motion and sets the stage for increasing the overall functioning of the organization.

Safety excellence is a marathon not a sprint. Continuous improvement and small significant steps is more important than short term gains done for “show”. In the end, creating true engagement is possible only by being — or becoming — a truly exceptional organization.