

Turning Supervisors into Safety Allies

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Introduction

A common issue for EHS professionals can be their interaction with supervisors. For the following discussion, supervisor is not referring to the person an EHS professional reports to in their organization's reporting structure; it is referring to the level in a organization that has responsibility for overseeing the day-to-day activities of some number of an organization's employees. The term may be "supervisor," "lead," "unit leader," "cell lead," "foreman," and so on. This position is often, but not always, the first level of management in an organization. In this paper, the role of this position in the safety process will be discussed. The discussion will then broaden to include why at times supervisors may not be actually supporting a safety process, and conclude with methods that can be utilized to aid in highlighting to supervision the importance of safety and the benefits of a high performing safety process to the efficiency and performance of the areas they have responsibility for.

Importance of Supervisor Classification

This begs the questions: Why is this classification so important? An argument can be made that management support is needed for any successful safety process, but why focus on this level of management which, per our definition, is not always technically management? The importance of this position to safety can be seen by outlining its importance to another position, that of the hourly worker. The term "hourly" is used to refer to the non-management employees whose tasks make up the bulk of activities generating revenue for a company. While many "hourly" employees may not be paid by the hour, it is referring to the employee status as non-exempt employee, meaning they are eligible for overtime (exempt status is often used to include a management or professional level in a company). By this definition, an hourly employee could be an operator in a manufacturing plant, a technician for a service company, a receiving clerk for an organization, or a driver. It should also be noted that hourly employees will likely be exposed to the most and greatest hazards (this may not be true in all circumstances). If our definition of supervisor is reviewed, it can be seen that this position, by its nature and job responsibilities, has

the greatest interface with the hourly employees. In fact, in many organizations, the majority of the supervisor's job duties revolve around direct interaction with the hourly employees. This position is on the ground level of activities conducted by the hourly employees, and has direct feedback on such activities. Consider how much time that managers, directors, and EHS professionals may spend interacting with hourly employees, in their work areas where hazards are present and control methods are attempting to be implemented. Often, these interactions by the previous groups are contrived; they are "walk-throughs," "inspections," "audits," or some such phrase. The managers, directors, or EHS personnel only interact with the hourly employee to observe the hazard they face or to observe how control methods are being applied. The hourly employees may surmise that, if the manager, director or professional is present, they are being evaluated as to their behavior and will adjust the behavior to what they believe the observer wants to see (this is especially true for the EHS professional). Compare this situation to that of the supervisor. The supervisor is interacting with the hourly employee on an on-going basis (in order for both to perform their jobs). The hourly employee may change behavior when the supervisor is present, but the frequency of this modification will be much greater. In fact, this frequency of interaction works in management's favor. Due to the increased frequency of interactions, the hourly employee will either begin adopting a behavior or, due to a psychological concept known as habituation, will show the employee's true behavior in a given situation. This means the supervisor is in a position to modify behavior (as outlined in the first case) or to observe true employee behavior (as in the second case). Relating to this number of interactions, the number of employees involved must be kept in mind. In the case of managers, directors and EHS professionals, many have whole organizations, buildings, or facilities in which to have these interactions. For some of these individuals, employee interactions may include any employee of the organization. For the supervisor, the group is much smaller, their department or span of control (those individuals reporting to the supervisor). This also is reflected in the fact that an employee can determine that the probability of being visited by the manager, director, or EHS professional is relatively small on any given day, but an interaction with their supervisor is almost certain.

Supervisor's Perspective

While the perspective of the hourly employee has been laid out, the perspective of the supervisor must also be understood. Looking at the supervisory position over the last 20 years, a change can be seen. Supervisors used to have to worry about "getting product out the door." Their role was exclusively production-oriented; just as EHS professionals started to realize the key role supervisors play, so did the other support functions. Today, a supervisor has to not only assure production but also assure compliance with a host of Human Resource, EHS and quality requirements.

The supervisors' role has expanded to include all of the classical tasks, plus a host of new tasks that were previously performed exclusively by support personnel. Consider also how supervisors are chosen for their role. While the specifics vary greatly between organizations, supervisors are often promoted from the hourly ranks. They can be chosen for many reasons:

work quality, work ethics, and a number of other hard-to-define attributes. Perhaps the organization believes the prospective supervisor has a learning attitude, that they enjoy challenges and new situations that require new learning. This discussion is relevant because the supervisor will be using a new set of skills than when they were hourly employees. Many of these skills will be “soft skills,” based on the ability to effectively interact with other people. Hopefully, the supervisor has a number of soft skills when they are promoted (or hired) into a supervisory position. Even if they have some of these skills, how are the remainder taught? Does the supervisor have a regiment of training (involving weeks) to learn such skills as coaching and role modeling? Or is the case more attuned to a single week of training, with a great deal of time taken up on how to complete required forms and computer screens? While the supervisor may have some of the soft skills needed or, in some cases, a “natural tendency” towards these skills, they are getting little if any training in applying these skills to their new position. They are expected to pick up these traits as they go.

While the skills are necessary when they first start their new position, they must still perform to a minimum level in their new position and (hopefully) learn these skills as they go (a condition that is sometimes described by the phrase “sink or swim”). While it will not be discussed in depth in this document, there are a host of emotional issues that can accompany a promotion to the supervisory level (i.e., new supervisors who direct responsibilities for fellow employees who are friends). With these extra support duties, with the new level of interaction and possible skills learning on how to interact with employees in a new position, the supervisor is also expected to manage their department in a self-reliant manner. While the supervisor is likely prompted to seek guidance for difficult situations, they are expected to make decisions regularly to assure their area of responsibility meets minimum requirements.

Supervisors are expected to prioritize all of these different task requirements and make decisions that enable their area of responsibility to run at a satisfactory level. The final point when discussing supervisors to keep in mind is that supervisors, even those who have been promoted from the hourly ranks, may be familiar with certain aspects of their areas of responsibilities, but will not be totally familiar. They will always be relying (or at least should be relying) on their subordinates to help them make decisions on tasks with which they are not adequately familiar.

As human beings are dynamic, it is impossible to state with any certainty how people will react. However, generally observed trends can be stated. While a number of supervisors will handle their job adequately on all fronts, the observations from the above paragraphs can also lead to other reactions. Perhaps, due to the various tasks the supervisor has to perform, EHS is seen as just another item to do. Checking boxes on checklists and completing accident reports with the corrective action of “told employee to be more careful” would be examples of this. The supervisor goes through the paces but the absolute minimum amount of resources possible is placed into the EHS process.

Another observed reaction is fatalism. This can be summed up in the phrase “accidents happen.” The supervisor may feel that their actions are irrelevant, and they have no control over the situation. Frustration at how the EHS process is working may be another outcome. The supervisor may believe they are applying their EHS process to the best of their ability, but the outcomes do not meet their (or their management’s) expectations. Another possible reaction is denial. The supervisor may express, through their actions and words, that EHS is not part of their responsibilities and belongs to another group (likely the EHS department).

Supervisors Working Against the EHS Process

The previous discussion highlights why supervisors may, in some cases, not be allies to the EHS process. In fact, in some of the cases above, the supervisor may work against the EHS process inadvertently. With the previous discussion on different views, strategies can be developed to address and correct the situation. This is especially important to the supervisor who may not realize the direct benefits an EHS process can have on their success. A supervisor who is an ally to an EHS process can be defined as a supervisor who takes responsibility for EHS in their area of responsibility, integrates EHS into their normal operational process, and seeks the EHS professional as needed to aid in their efforts. In essence, it is a supervisor who is fulfilling their role in the EHS process. If a supervisor is fulfilling their role, it would be natural for them to view the EHS professional aiding them in their role (personal issues aside) as their “ally.”

With this understanding, what strategies should the EHS professional use to begin to help supervisors realize the allied nature to their relationship? A good first step is to speak their language. While the supervisor has assumed additional duties over the years, their primary responsibility is still operations. In an effort to facilitate communication, the EHS professional should speak from a business perspective. While there are numerous moral and ethical reasons for a good EHS process, leave them aside (only for the moment), and build the business case for a good program. The process can begin with the supervisor by explaining what an injury really costs them. They may have never heard of the indirect cost of injuries and, even if they have, do not realize what these indirect costs mean to them. As the supervisor in an area where the injury occurred, they bear the brunt of the indirect costs. Start by explaining what resources they use due to injuries.

Even in the area of compliance, EHS professionals have an opportunity to describe the effects on the supervisor if a regulatory inspection finds deficits. The price of OSHA fines are always an issue, but the citations that lead to a fine can lead to even higher fines (willful and repeat violations). Depending on the issues, it can also lead to a work stoppage. Once the citation is issued and accepted (in some form), the abatement process becomes public, to a much greater extent than if it was handled internally out of the supervisor’s control. The process can start by highlighting to the supervisor exactly what effect a poor EHS process will have on them.

Speaking the Supervisor’s Language

Speaking the supervisor's language is the first step in the allying process. So what other items can aid in the process? As outlined in previous paragraphs, one of the issues faced by the supervisor is a lack of knowledge. The supervisor was likely not well versed in the skills needed for the

primary focus of their functions, never mind the support functions. They may have received instruction on the technicalities, but not the explanation behind why the actions are performed. It is much easier to see why actions are important if the rationale behind them is understood. This baits the question: What needs to be explained? It has been the experience of the author that explaining the rationale behind the following topics can aid the supervisor to better apply their EHS skills:

- Basic Safety Theory/Hazard recognition
- Risk Assessment
- Auditing/Accident Investigation

Why these specific skills? They are at the essence of the supervisor's role in the EHS process.

Safety can be daunting to many non-EHS professionals. There are all of these rules and procedures, and what point do they serve anyway? Explaining the basic of safety theory to the supervisor can be very beneficial from the point of view that some of these items, which may have originally seemed non-essential, suddenly have their importance highlighted. The supervisor must come to see safety for what it is: a probability-based system. Safety items do not eliminate the chance of an injury; they lower the probability of it happening (or the severity if it occurs). Even the safest organization in the world has a chance (minute) of a fatality happening. Once this is understood, the supervisor can start to understand that the hazards safety professionals discuss are just single probabilities of a negative event occurring.

Safety is trying to change the probability of injury to as low as possible. A similar statement can be said of environmental compliance. Once the supervisor understands that probability will never be zero, this is a natural introduction to risk assessment. The supervisor and the EHS professional have to somehow decide what risk is low enough that to further control will waste resources with very little gain; together, they determine the acceptable risk. This determination may become a bone of contention between the EHS professional and supervisor, but realize what has occurred at this step. The supervisor and EHS professional are no longer debating whether controls should be in place; specific controls are being debated. In fact the supervisor will likely agree that a majority of the controls are needed and will debate only specific items instead of the overall process.

Auditing and accident investigation are critical to the supervisor's EHS function and some time should be spent explaining the basics of these topics to the supervisors. While the technical phrase of auditing is used, the terminology may vary. Inspections, walk-through, and Gemba walks can all serve the same purpose. The main point to communicate is the need to do some type of documented inspection, which includes the generation of corrective actions, and that these corrective actions are followed up upon. Corrective actions are also important when discussing accident investigation. It should be highlighted to the supervisor that any accident could have been a fatality and, therefore, a well-thought-out corrective action is warranted.

Training of Supervisors

The last step in the aligning process refers back to the discussion on supervisory training. A number of supervisors have had limited training on the soft skills needed to perform their duties. These soft skills can be referred to as management or leadership skills. Especially important among these skills are training skills, if the supervisor is to have any duties to conduct training. While some people are natural coaches, role-models, and leaders, this is not universally true. A natural inclination in any of these areas does not automatically translate into a usable skill. Any management skills training that a supervisor receives will help with the EHS process. Since the supervisor may have to coach for proper EHS performance, their efforts will be easier if they understand role-modeling and make a point to exhibit certain behavior. Of course, applying proper discipline will ease a difficult topic to the greatest extent possible. Trainer skills are specially mentioned due to a high occurrence of discomfort with public speaking. While some individuals may be skilled at dealing with employees on a one-to-one basis, they may have a high level of discomfort when addressing groups, and this includes groups with which they are well acquainted.

Conclusion

Just as in other aspects of EHS, following the steps outlined above cannot assure cooperation and a good relationship with supervisors. That said, following the steps laid out can greatly increase the likelihood of a good relationship. One of the items you will note, if you follow the steps laid out above, is that not only are you aiding the supervisor in building their personal EHS skills, you are aiding them in building their supervisory skills as well. The EHS professional has a vested interest in the supervisor performing their job duties well. The EHS job duties may be of most importance to the EHS professional, but these soft skills carry over to all aspects of the supervisor's job duties, including EHS. By developing them as a supervisor, you help them grow in all of their roles, not just EHS.

This may affect the supervisor positively by making their task effective and efficient. By working with the EHS professional to increase their EHS skills, they have increased all of their skills and, hopefully, improved their work performance. By working together, both parties meet their basic needs, and, in fact, may create an environment where both can thrive and open the door for new opportunities. This would be the essence of the concept of allying, that both parties can do more together than they can separately. By working with the supervisor, they can both see the benefits of working together and their task can, depending on the circumstance, go from competitive (for resources) to complementary (lending resources to each).