

## **The Roles of Managers, Supervisors and Safety and Health Professionals for Maximizing Safety and Health Performance**

**Samuel J. Gualardo, CSP  
President  
National Safety Consultants Inc.  
Salix, Pennsylvania**

### **Introduction**

In organizations that attain safety and health performance excellence, senior managers, middle managers, first line supervisors and safety professionals are equally engaged in the management of safety and health. Their roles, responsibilities, and activities are clearly defined and executed with zeal and precision. This paper will discuss how management effectively manages safety and health in the safest companies in the US and abroad.

### **Understanding the Roles of Managers, Supervisors, and Safety Professionals**

Before we explore the roles that need to be embraced to improve safety performance, we need to review some cold hard facts about effective safety management. First, effective safety management isn't about preventing accidents... it's really about line management learning how to better manage their workforce and workplace. If line managers and supervisors learn and execute some very basic Management 101 concepts, safety performance is among one of many aspects of the business they manage that will improve. Safety performance excellence is the foundation for achieving excellence in everything in many if not all work environments.

Second, employees don't come to work with the intention of suffering an injury or of being killed on the job... but this can be the result for two reasons: because management didn't properly influence their behavior, and/or because management didn't provide a safe work environment. Management is obligated to protect their workers. In many cases these workers won't protect themselves! Employees frequently trade off their personal safety for a paycheck. This occurs in many workplaces where workers are constantly provided direct and indirect incentives for taking risks.

Third, everyone in the organization is not responsible for safety. The organizations that consistently perform well understand the fact that management needs to be responsible for managing the safety process and must be held accountable personally and financially for results. They also know that for performance to improve and be sustained, employees must be held responsible to perform according to management's directives.

Next, management and supervisors at all levels must be held to a high standard for safety performance. And to firmly establish this accountability, meaningful performance measures along with strong incentives and disincentives need to be operational to guide managers and supervisors actions every day.

Last, without proper role delineation and execution, safety and health performance can be managed. However, it will never be maximized! Role delineation is very important. Roles need to be clearly established and deliberately communicated.

Within each organization, several individuals are needed for maximizing safety performance. They include the following:

- Senior Managers – individuals at the top of the line organization; for example, President, Plant Manager.
- Middle Managers – who oversee the functions of employees who are at risk.
- First Line Supervisors – who direct the activities of at-risk personnel.
- EHS and Staff Professionals – who support the entire organization.

Broadly speaking, senior managers create the vision for safety excellence. Middle managers facilitate the execution of the vision. First line supervisors execute the vision, and EHS and other staff professionals function to assist all levels in successfully carrying out and monitoring the execution of the vision.

## **The Roles of Senior Managers in Driving Performance**

Many companies fail to control accidents, injuries, and associated costs ... simply because their senior managers do not convey the necessary emphasis! For safety excellence to be realized, senior managers must demonstrate the high value of safety to the organization through their personal commitment and personal involvement.

The role of senior managers regarding commitment means giving safety “equal billing” compared to other organizational priorities. It means providing necessary financial and labor resources to accomplish the vision of excellence. But throwing dollars at the safety improvement process and providing the occasional lip service alone won't cut it. Safety must become a “hot button” issue if improvements are going to occur and the safety culture change. But most important, ensuring performance accountability at all management and employee levels is imperative.

To go from good to great requires committed and involved senior leadership. The senior manager is the most crucial factor in motivating line managers to accept and execute the safety

responsibility. They have the power to change the norms, beliefs, assumptions and even misconceptions that influence safety performance and the safety culture.

Several studies over the years prove this point. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health studied 42 plants in 6 industries. They concluded that the number one factor to drive safety performance was senior management commitment. The University of Nebraska studied 143 firms covering nearly 38,000 employees. They found that top management involvement produced 470% fewer injuries in the organizations where this quality was present. Michigan State tested whether top management involvement was important. They too concluded that top management clearly determined safety performance. The Construction Industry Institute conducted a million-dollar research project to understand why safety excellence was attained in some companies versus others. They found that in the companies where the CEO set and communicated the safety expectations and held management accountable for results, safety excellence was achievable. Finally, the University of Colorado recently studied corporate cultures in companies with outstanding safety results. By no surprise, they found that one of the three factors that influenced the safety culture was senior management commitment and involvement.

So, what role do senior managers need to play in creating line management safety and health leadership? First and foremost, it must be understood that they are the only persons in the organization who can permit line managers to focus on safety with the same diligence as production output, quality, and cost management. They are the ones who have the ability to instill the balance necessary to improve safety performance.

Senior managers need to demonstrate commitment to safety, demonstrate involvement in safety, and demonstrate accountability for performance. Demonstrated commitment means having unbending expectations for achievement of safety excellence. Demonstrated involvement means personally leading the organizations improvement efforts and physically participating in activities to visibly show involvement. Finally, accountability translates to not tolerating poor safety performance or performers at all levels of the organization.

The role of senior managers regarding involvement entails becoming a safety champion as well as constantly communicating the vision for improvement. In addition, senior managers need to be engaged in performing structured activities such as: safety tours; safety stand-downs; safety stand-ups; root cause evaluations; chairing safety leadership teams; measuring, monitoring, leading, and trailing safety performance indicators; and performing frequent managerial safety performance reviews.

To achieve safety performance excellence, management and supervisory accountability is imperative. Senior managers need to prevent line managers from shirking their safety responsibilities. They can't allow line manager safety activities such as facility audits, worker observations, incident investigations and safety communications to be done poorly. They can't accept rationalizations for poor performance or try to rationalize it themselves. They can't be satisfied with just being good. Under no circumstances can they compromise safety for the sake of achieving any other business objective. Finally, they need to avoid delegating the safety responsibility to others and must spend quality time on managing safety improvements.

Key activities for senior managers include:

- Creating uncompromising expectations for the attainment of safety performance excellence.
- Integrating attainable leading and trailing performance indicators into the business plan.
- Establishing and rewarding milestone accomplishments.
- Requiring annual Safety Management Action Plans to be developed.
- Using safety performance as a key measure for salary increases, bonuses, and promotions.
- Measuring, force ranking, and publicly displaying peer safety performance.
- Instituting annual 360 degree safety perception surveys of managers and supervisors.
- Assuring political barriers in the way of safety concerns are bypassed.
- Beginning all meetings with discussion regarding current safety performance status and areas of concern.
- Regularly integrating safety messages into written correspondence.
- Requiring immediate 24 hour verbal notification of serious incidents.
- Reaffirming the safety philosophy often.
- Providing adequate staffing of the (EHS) function.

*An organization's safety performance results are directly reflective of the passion demonstrated by Senior Managers.*

## **First Line Supervisor and Middle Manager Safety Roles**

Line managers at all levels of the organization need to play an active and visible role in safety management. First line supervisors need to carry out specific tasks and be measured on the effectiveness of those tasks. Middle managers need to assure subordinates meet performance measures and assure they perform safety activities in a quality fashion. In addition, middle managers also need to become physically involved in tasks to demonstrate their commitment to the safety process.

Middle managers also play an important role with respect to improving organizational safety performance. Ultimately, the behavior of supervisors and workers relative to safety performance is normally a direct reflection of the desires conveyed by their boss. If middle managers are not executing their roles successfully, the critical link between senior managers and first line supervisors is broken. Therefore, excellence will not be attained and the safety culture will be perpetually stagnant.

For all line managers and supervisors, competing priorities, if not properly balanced will always cause safety performance to suffer. These competing priorities in most organizations include production output, quality, cost management, and safety. Balancing these priorities is a matter of management and supervisory behavior. Achieving safety excellence has always been about changing behavior. Proper management behaviors will ultimately produce the desired supervisory and employee behaviors. Middle managers play a key role in helping first line supervisors keep things in balance.

Middle managers can best perform their roles by:

- Communicating safety expectations to line supervisors on a regular basis.
- Providing the necessary support and resources to line supervisors.

- Developing action plans to accomplish the goals and also address problem areas and problem employees.
- Closely measuring and monitoring supervisory safety performance.
- Modeling desired behaviors.
- Assuring that working safely is truly a condition of employment.
- Recognizing and rewarding safe performance.
- Chairing and participating on Safety Leadership Teams.
- Conducting frequently scheduled safety tours.
- Leading serious incident investigations to identify root causes in an effort to prevent future incidents.

First line supervisors also play a pivotal role in attaining safety performance excellence. First Line supervisors create and control the workplace environment where incidents and injuries occur. Safety performance excellence equates to how well line supervisors influence the behaviors of their workers and it's no different than anything else.

First line supervisors need to first and foremost be observing rules and constantly working on modeling the behaviors they expect their employees to emulate. First line supervisors also need to spend ample time communicating their safety performance expectations to employees. First line supervisors also need to assure employees are provided with the necessary safety resources. They need to be personally involved with conducting frequent structured and measured activities such as worker safety observations, safety meetings, safety training, and incident investigations. To be successful, first line supervisors also need to spend time publically recognizing good performance and effectively dealing with poor performance.

Additional first line supervisor key activities include:

- Conducting pre-task safety reviews/briefings to assure workers are properly advised of pending risks, hazards, and remediation measures.
- Facilitating group safety problem solving meetings.
- Developing safe job procedures and rules.
- Training employees on safety rules, regulations, procedures, and consequences for nonconformance.
- Frequently observing and discussing individual worker safety performance.
- Formally counseling at-risk employees to correct poor safety performance and/or at-risk behaviors.
- Utilizing formal corrective action along with recognition and rewards to produce desired behaviors.

## **The Roles of Safety, Health and Environmental Professionals**

Surprisingly enough, EHS and Staff Professionals do not play a primary or leading role in facilitating safety performance culture change. Their role is to support line managers and help them succeed. It is not the function of the EHS professionals and other staff to create a new safety culture. And, it's not possible! In all unsuccessful safety cultures, the direction for safety,

resolution of safety issues, and safety performance results are seen as the EHS Department's responsibility.

The proper role for EHS and other staff professionals to play in helping the organization attain safety excellence primarily includes coordinating the direction of the broad process. They also need to spend most of their time assisting line management in performing their activities. Additional time needs to be spent consulting with and supporting line management in the areas of regulatory compliance, workers' compensation administration, regulatory training, industrial hygiene, and assuring line managers and their operations are protected through effective regulatory auditing. However, the bottom line is they must be perceived as and function as advisors, and are not responsible for safety performance outcomes produced by line managers and supervisors.

Some additional key activities of the EHS and other support staff include:

- Creating structured processes to measure and communicate safety performance.
- Trending safety and incident data to determine problem areas.
- Assuring the organization is focused on high incident severity potentials, high incident frequency potentials, and "at-risk" employees.
- Developing effective Corrective Action Processes.
- Establishing broad safety policies.
- Coordinating safety communications initiatives to assure focus.
- Facilitating the training of line management on safety responsibilities.
- Developing and implementing contractor safety policies.
- Conducting frequent regulatory audits and advising management and supervisors of significant regulatory issues and exposures.
- Tracking and frequently reporting the status of regulatory compliance improvement initiatives.
- Interfacing with regulators both proactively and reactively.
- Keeping abreast of safety advancements to assist the organization and to keep their skills honed.

## **Aligning, Measuring and Monitoring Performance**

To facilitate and sustain safety excellence, several other important issues need to be considered if roles, responsibilities, and activities are going to be accepted and successfully employed. These issues include, properly aligning roles, making sure everyone involved is provided with the understanding to accept and execute their roles, establishing proper measures to assess role execution, and establishing performance accountabilities.

Regarding role alignment, job descriptions and performance contracts need to clearly and adequately discuss performance responsibilities. These documents need to establish quantified leading and trailing indicator performance measures. Additionally, they need to provide proper weighting of safety responsibilities in comparison to other responsibilities to assure safety is not overshadowed.

With respect to understanding, accepting, and executing roles, senior managers, line managers, supervisors, and staff support functions need to be trained. They need to be trained to understand their specific roles and key activities. They also need to be trained on how to properly execute their roles. This is not something that everyone simply understands because they are a senior manager, middle manager, first line supervisor, or staff professional. Training is essential for long term success. And, ongoing assistance is necessary from EHS and other support staff after training concludes.

Measurement of role execution is another important consideration for long-term success. To accomplish this, attainable leading, current and trailing performance goals need to be established. Constant measurement and continual feedback to those responsible for goal attainment is imperative.

Finally, establishing accountability and ownership is the most critical function in making sure roles are accepted and executed flawlessly. Employee safety perception surveys along with 360 degree safety reviews should be used regularly to assess and promote safety ownership. As part of the performance review process, safety performance goals need to be appropriately weighted among other performance goals to assure adequate attention is focused. Similarly, salary increases and bonuses need to also be weighted appropriately to assure that focus on other business areas won't compromise the attention being afforded to managing and improving safety. Finally, personal as well as historically managed safety performance experience should be a strong consideration with respect to line management and supervisory promotions. Organizations that are serious about attaining safety excellence do not promote persons to positions of higher authority and responsibility when they have proven to be unsuccessful at managing safety. They fully understand that safety is a relatively easy function to manage. A lack of success in safety management normally translates into a lack of success in other functions managed.

## **Conclusion**

Safety performance excellence can be attained in any organization. However, for excellence to be realized, roles and responsibilities must be clearly aligned, understood and executed. This is the first and most important step in changing a safety culture.