

Feature Story

SAFETY CULTURE

9 Steps to Achieve Change, Part 1 of 2

By Gary A. Higbee

An organization's safety culture is a lot like the weather. It's an invisible presence that surrounds everybody in the organization; it dictates mood and affects performance.

There's also an old expression about the weather: Everybody talks about it but nobody does anything about it. Safety culture is similar — it's easy to talk about but hard to change. Hard but not impossible. That's because, unlike the weather, human beings do have the capacity to change the safety culture. I've seen it happen again and again in all kinds of industries and at all kinds of workplaces.

How do they do it? And how can you change *your* safety culture? There are nine steps to take.

1. Practice What You Preach (and Vice Versa)

As safety leaders, it's incumbent upon us to walk the talk. We must remain dedicated to the safety message 100 percent of the time. Not just at work but at home and at play. The moment we stray, our message is lost.

2. Meet Regulatory Standards

The regulations set out by OSHA, MSHA and other government agencies are minimum standards. They're a starting point, not an ultimate destination. We can and should aim higher. But they're still essential. As safety leaders, we need to be familiar with all of the regulatory requirements and tailor our safety programs accordingly.

3. Build a Base of Support

To effect culture change, you must enlist the support of like-minded people in your organization. At every organization there are those who understand the concepts of compliance, conditions, risk, reward and behavior. These individuals represent the best prospects for support.



Gary A. Higbee

[bio](#) | [email](#)

Editor's Note: *Next week, in Part 2 of this series, Gary discusses the second R of committee success: Responsibilities*

4. Promote the Company Line

Safety directors are not lone rangers. They're part of management and must represent company policy. Although its position might differ slightly from yours, especially to the extent that it's colored by productivity, quality, profitability and other concerns, upper management can be counted on to express support for safety. Thus, if it hasn't already done so, ask upper management to issue a written statement of support for and commitment to a safe and healthy workplace. Post copies of the statement throughout the workplace in conspicuous locations where they're bound to come to workers' attention. A statement of management support underlines the importance of safety and promotes cultural change.

5. Train Your Supervisors

This sounds like an obvious point. But I've been in the safety business for a long time and I repeatedly see organizations leaving supervisors out of the safety loop. Most supervisors understand their responsibilities for quality, cost and production. But safety isn't an ingrained supervisor responsibility — at least at many organizations. It's something that requires deliberate training and explanation.

Conclusion

My orders from the SafetyXChange staff are to keep things short so you can get back to work. A good soldier always follows orders. So I'll describe the final four things you need to do to improve the safety culture at your organization in next week's installment.

Source: Florida Museum of Natural History

QUESTION OF THE WEEK

How Much Can You Spend on Safety Products/Services without Express Management Authorization?

1. No Leeway

Nothing, I have to get everything authorized, even though the contract has a built in budget for safety on a per hour worked basis.

Bill Neilson
Safety Manager
Kiewit Industrial Canada Company
Husky Clean Fuels Project

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2. No Leeway Is No Obstacle

I am the Environmental, Health, and Safety Coordinator (big title, little authority) for a Fortune 100 company. I have NO authority to spend on safety products, and when I ask to spend I have to justify the cost. I make purchases any way, I'm sure that someday it will come back to haunt me.

Name and company withheld by request

3. Lots of Leeway

I can spend up to \$5,500 on safety equipment, training, etc. on my own. After that I need to go up to the next level of approval. What that amount is I do not know. That being said, if I say we need something in excess of \$5,500, I normally get it with the stroke of a pen. We are very safety and environmentally aware and never intentionally do anything to harm a person or the environment.

Name and company withheld by request

4. A Precautionary Approach

I always communicate with upper management before I spend a single dime on our safety program. Not so much for permission yet, more just to inform them on the details of 'why' the money needs to be spent. I am very fortunate as I receive very little (if any) resistance from upper management when it comes to spending money on our employees' safety.

Author Biography - Gary A. Higbee

Gary A. Higbee CSP, MBA worked for more than 30 years for John Deere & Company where he held assignments in safety, environmental, production and engineering. He was also the Corporate Safety Director for Maytag and Manager of Health, Safety & Environmental for the Budd Company Stamping and Frame Division.

Gary is a Certified Safety Professional and has an MBA from the University of Iowa. Currently he is working towards a Ph.D. in Industrial Technology at Iowa State University.

Gary was recognized in 1993 as the Safety Professional of the Year by Region IV of the American Society of Safety Engineers. He is past chairman and long time member of the National Safety Council's Automotive, Tooling and Metal Working Section Executive Board. Gary is also active as an adjunct Professor at Iowa State University; business and safety

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consultant; and expert witness.

Recently, Gary has had a number of articles published including his most recent article "The Frustration with Safety" and is currently working on two articles, "Visionary Leadership" and "Managing Complex Change".

Using over 35 years of experience and a dry sense of humor, Gary has become a nationally known speaker on safety, health, environmental and business issues.

Gary will be speaking on "Taking Safety Home" and "Safety Committees" and at the Tennessee Safety Council conference on July 25 in Nashville. Gary's four-part series on the Secrets to Effective Safety Committees is also available in the SafetyXChange archives. As mentioned at the end of the story, Gary will be at the NSC annual conference in Orlando Sept. 21 and 22, where he'll deliver three presentations: Sept. 21: "Financing the Safety Effort." Sept. 22: "Shiftwork & the Aging Workforce" and "The Solution-Breaking the Cycle of Risky Behavior" (which Gary will co-present with his partner, Larry Wilson.). Larry's BBS program "Safe Track" is also up for an award and may be featured on the big screen during the Film & Multimedia Festival.

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