



Safety Culture

7 Strategies of Great Safety Managers

James Langford | Jul 14, 2022

The effectiveness of workplace safety programs can be measured in dollars and cents as well as employee injuries and, in some cases, lives. What's tougher to figure out are the management tactics that separate successes from failures.

Some are the same practices employed by great managers of any stripe, with the same ultimate goals.

"Before you are a leader, success is all about growing yourself," former General Electric CEO Jack Welch wrote in his book *"Winning,"* co-authored by his wife, Suzy Welch. "When you become a leader, success is all about growing others."

It's advice that sums up neatly the habits and characteristics of effective safety managers, detailed by the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration—the nation's top regulator—as well as independent consultants and industry publications.

They range from listening to workers on the front line to learning the hazards inherent in the company's operations, setting a clear vision for organizational safety and visibly following its guidelines.

Building and maintaining strong safety programs is vital for company leaders in the U.S., where the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics recorded **2.7 million workplace injuries** along with 4,764 deaths in 2020, the most recent year for which data was available.

Of the injuries, **373,300 occurred** in the manufacturing industry, second only to the roughly 800,000 in the healthcare field.

To lower the risk of accidents and injuries at your workplace, here are some of the recommendations from safety professionals and advocates, which you can adapt to your company's unique needs, along with sources of additional information and links for further research.

1. Listen to Employees Before You Act

The best way to start is by listening to other employees, says the *American Society of Safety Professionals*. Front-line workers can offer the most useful insight into how they do their jobs on a daily basis, which will help safety managers come up with ways to make those duties less hazardous, Julia Kunlo, vice president of Evolution Safety Resources, says in an article on the society's website.

“Trying to make changes before you understand the people who have been doing it for 20-30 years is going to make it an uphill battle, so talk to the people who are doing it,” Kunlo says.

2. Learn Safety Hazards Firsthand

Kunlo also recommends spending time in the field with workers, observing what they do and how they do it, then seeking their input on ideal safety rules.

“If you ask somebody how they’re doing their job, what they think the risks are or what they think you should be focusing on, 90% of the time, people are willing to help you,” she says in the ASSP article. “You just don’t make the right choices when you have a theoretical knowledge. If you’re going to be making policies and procedures and telling people how to do their job, first you have to know how to do the job.”

3. Study Regulations and Standards

Crafting an effective safety strategy requires a thorough understanding of both regulations set by OSHA, as well as the voluntary standards set by professional organizations such as the American National Standards Institute, Kunlo says. OSHA’s general industry rules are detailed in *Standard 1910*, while those for construction are spelled out in *Standard 1926*.

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Evolution Safety Resources

Additionally, *ANSI Standard Z10* offers further guidelines for creating and upgrading an effective safety strategy, Kunlo says.

Studying the rules once won’t be enough, warns Billy Arcement, a leadership consultant who has written about effective safety management practices.

“If you are not learning, you are regressing because there is always something new on the horizon,” he writes in an *article posted on the networking site LinkedIn*. “Regulatory inspectors are not looking for excuses. They want implementation of items, not a non-compliant safety program.”

4. Share a Clear, Written Policy with Workers

A clear, written policy conveys to workers at all levels that workplace safety is a core company value, just as important as productivity and profit, OSHA says on its website. The agency recommends having top management sign the policy document, then sharing it with workers as well as subcontractors, suppliers and customers when appropriate.

5. Invest in Equipment, Training and Other Resources

It’s up to company managers to ensure appropriate resources are available for their safety program, *OSHA notes*.

That means not only estimating the cost of equipment and supplies but incorporating training into workers’ schedules and ensuring they have the time to participate.

Necessary tools may include vendor information, Safety Data Sheets and access to safety and health experts, OSHA says. Some are available through the agency’s free *On-Site Consultation Program*.

6. Reward Helpful Workers

Helping colleagues resolve safety issues isn't part of most workers' job descriptions, but many are happy to do it, according to the environment, health and safety publication *EHS Today*.

"If these employees feel that this participation is unnoticed or unappreciated by management, their enthusiasm turns to cynicism," the publication writes. "Make sure that you encourage them by recognizing their value to employee safety and health and by letting them know you appreciate their help."

7. React Promptly to Safety Concerns

Workers who alert managers to safety concerns expect a response quickly, even if the problem can't be resolved right away, *writes* Arcement, the author of books including "*Leading Yourself, Leading Others*," and "*Searching for Success*."

"You don't want to be considered a black hole when it comes to safety," he says. "Set deadlines for yourself to get back to the individuals who provide you with a request for help. The more rapid the response, the greater credibility you will establish."

What tactics have you used to make your company's safety program more effective? Tell us in the comments below.

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