**How to engage your workforce for superior safety and health performance**

Safety starts day one. From the first day you bring a new employee on board, you want that new hire to be motivated, committed and emotionally engaged in your safety processes. And new hire safety orientation sessions are an excellent time to develop and instill that sense of engagement. It’s more than likely that the new employee has an open attitude about safety in your organization. He or she is fresh to your ideas and your culture. Habits and mindsets -- good or bad – have not had time to take root.

So where do you begin to build an expectation and accountability for participation – engagement -- in safety activities?

Present to employees the idea that engagement in safety – both on the individual and team or department level – is a core value of your safety culture. Culture, the organization’s values and beliefs that shape everyday behavior and attitudes, is a key determinant to achieve and sustain engagement. Culture is commonly referred to as “the way things are done around here.” And ongoing engagement in safety processes must be “one of the things done around here.” Make this plain to new hires, the same as you constantly remind all your workforce about the value the organization places on safety engagement, the expectations for and the accountability for individual and collective engagement.

**The role of senior leaders**

Culture starts at the top. Senior leadership sets the cultural values or norms, and must consistently and visibly model them. Senior leaders must communicate their expectation and support for having their employees truly engaged in their work, including the safety aspects of work. Presenteeism – showing up for work to only go through the motions as on autopilot – is toxic behavior; this must be made clear by your senior leaders from day one of an employee’s experience in your work and safety culture.

Your employees, both new and veteran, might question you: “What exactly do you mean by engagement?” Here you need to be very clear and direct. To be *emotionally* engaged, employees form positive and meaningful connections with their co-workers. To be *cognitively* engaged, employees are sharply aware of their purpose and role in their work environment.

**How to build meaningful relationships**

There are numerous ways to build emotional and cognitive engagement. To establish positive and meaningful relations among coworkers, you can make the most of meetings; training sessions;

team-building exercises; role playing; game playing; mentoring and coaching between employees; group safety activities such as workplace audits and incident investigations; safety steering committees; safety achievement recognition events; safety performance incentive programs; employee-to-employee job safety observations and interpersonal feedback conversations; communications such as newsletters, emails and social media use of Twitter and Facebook; and storytelling (which can occur during regular safety meetings, in which employees tell each other about lessons learned from accidents and close calls.)

To establish an employee’s sense of purpose and a sure sense of their role (and potential for advancement in your organization) you need to fully address and have answers for three psychological issues that can influence an employee’s internal work motivations: 1) How meaningful is it for me to bring myself to this level of job performance? 2) Can I fully pursue my role without any blaming, backstabbing and backroom gossip – am I psychologically safe in my work culture? 3) Do I have the energy to put into this? To be engaged is an exertion of energy.

**Educating employees**

One way to answer these questions is to educate employees about the benefits of engagement, of being committed to the job; to doing it safely; to watch out not only for one’s own safety but the safety of co-workers; and to actively care about safety performance, job performance, and the organization’s goals. The benefits can be personal: fully engaged employees have the trust of managers and co-workers; their respect; and their prospects for career advancement improve. It’s important that you answer the “What’s in it for me?” question.

The benefits of engagement go beyond an individual orientation. Engaged employees strengthen your safety culture. The number of eyes on the job, looking out for safety hazards, multiplies. Safety performance improves because everyone is on the lookout for safe and unsafe attitudes and behaviors, not just the safety department. Safety-related incidents will likely drop. Near-miss or close call reporting increases. More hazards are identified and called to the attention of supervisors, managers and the safety department. Assumptions and guesses about why accidents occur or almost occur are replaced by information supplied by employees -- who are in the best position to know where and when the next accident is most likely to occur. Barriers to safety – physical conditions, outdated work practices, over-restrictive rules and so forth that get in the way of employees working safely – are identified, along with solutions. These actions and interactions among employees increase the prospects of tighter, more meaningful work relationships and bonds being formed.

**Evidence-based benefits of engagement**

Gallup is one of a number of researchers that has studied how well employee engagement predicts key performance outcomes. In 2012, Gallup researchers studied 49,928 work units, including nearly 1.4 million employees. This eighth iteration of Gallup’s meta-analysis international research confirmed the connection between employee engagement and nine performance outcomes: customer ratings; profitability; productivity; turnover (for high-turnover and low-turnover organizations); safety incidents;

shrinkage (theft); absenteeism; patient safety incidents; and quality (defects).

In the Gallup findings, work units in the top quartile in employee engagement outperformed bottom-quartile units by 10% on customer ratings, 22% in profitability, and 21% in productivity. Work units in the top quartile also saw significantly lower turnover (25% in high-turnover organizations, 65% in low-turnover organizations), shrinkage (28%), and absenteeism (37%) and fewer safety incidents (48%), patient safety incidents (41%), and quality defects (41%).

Gallup's research also showed that companies with engaged workforces have higher earnings per share (EPS), and they seem to have recovered from the Great Recession at a faster rate. In a study, Gallup examined 49 publicly traded companies with EPS data available from 2008-2012 engagement data available from 2010 and/or 2011 in its database. This study found that businesses with a critical mass of engaged employees outperformed their competition:

• Companies with an average of 9.3 engaged employees for every actively disengaged employee in 2010-2011 experienced 147% higher EPS compared with their competition in 2011-2012.

• Companies with an average of 2.6 engaged employees for every actively disengaged employee, in contrast, experienced 2% lower EPS compared with their competition during that same time period.

Here is more hard, bottom line evidence that employers should care if their employees are engaged: [Towers Perrin](http://investing.businessweek.com/research/stocks/snapshot/snapshot.asp?capId=344968) consulting has found that companies with engaged employees boosted operating income by 19% compared with companies with the lowest percentage of engaged employees, which saw operating income fall 33%. What does that mean in real dollars? For S&P 500 companies, Watson Wyatt consulting reports that a significant improvement in employee engagement increases revenue by $95 million.

The effects of engagement on employee productivity, retention, and recruitment are also impressive – and real-world. Watson Wyatt found companies with highly engaged employees experienced 26% higher employee productivity, lower turnover risk, greater ability to attract top talent, and 13% higher total returns to shareholders during a five-year period.

Plus, research determined that highly engaged employees are twice as likely to be top performers—and miss 20% fewer days of work. They also exceed expectations in performance reviews and are more supportive of organizational change initiatives.

**Realizing the benefits**

To realize the benefits of engagement, there are a number of actions you can take. Ask employees questions. Recognize the value of their experience on the job and their ideas about how to do a job more safely, more productively, and with improvements in quality and error rates. Give employees their voice. Show your respect. And then listen -- carefully. Show you care. And show you care about employees as whole people, with lives beyond work, not just as “assets” to the company. Have conversations about hobbies, health and wellness, vacations, families, what employees are doing when they’re not at work.

According to one study, 78% of Gen Exers and 80% of millennials say they actually prefer in-person communication with their colleagues in place of email, social media, text messaging and instant messaging. Younger generation employees are indeed more tech savvy, but they want it “old school” when it comes to communication.

Give your employees a certain amount of freedom and space to make their own decisions regarding how work gets done, and gets done safely. Respect and recognize their know-how and skills. Employees who have a sense of autonomy over their work appreciate not being micromanaged. This frees up more energy on their part.

Walk the walk and talk the talk. Model that sense of commitment to the job and to safety. Go beyond the call of duty yourself. People are motivated by motivated people.

Accentuate the positive. People appreciate praise. They want to know they’re doing a good job. This can be no more than a few words of simple encouragement. Personalize your feedback; make it specific and make it about the individual. In the field of positive psychology, cognitive neuroscientists have studied the effects of positive and negative emotions on thought processes. Studies conclude that experiencing negative emotions results in a narrowing and focusing of the thought process – tunnel vision, in other words. Narrow, confined thinking and seeing of course is a problem in many accident scenarios. The same studies have found that experiencing positive emotions is associated with exactly the opposite effect. Thought processes show a broadening and expansion of mental focus. This sets up people to think outside the box, to see new and more alternatives to job problems and safety problems.

**Beware of employee perceptions of “programs”**

If you desire more engaged employees in your workplace, don’t call engagement activities a “program.” Employees have seen many programs come and go, and many employees become skeptical and cynical about “here’s another program.” Programs carry the baggage of being seen as management forms of manipulation, forms of command and control. No one feels good when they are manipulated, or feels like they are being taken advantage of. Poorly designed engagement “programs” give employees the impression that the organization wants to squeeze the last ounce of productivity out of them; that these programs really are about doing more work for less cost. They are perceived as being for the benefit of the company’s bottom line, not the well-being and personal growth of the individual.

Engagement activities should not be seen as “programs” but rather the core values of your culture being put into practice. Engagement should be viewed as something “we” do together. Engagement is a “we thing.” The organization wants employees who are healthy, happy, connected and appreciative. Employees want companies that are likewise healthy, productive, connected and appreciative.

**Be prepared for pushback**

To build safety engagement capacity in your organization, it’s a good idea to be prepared for various forms of pushback you might encounter. After all, a widely reported Gallup Poll in 2011 found only 30% of U.S. workers employed full or part-time to be engaged in their work. About half of U.S. workers were not engaged, and nearly one in five were actively disengaged. Engaged employees are involved an enthusiastic. Those who are not engaged might be satisfied with their jobs but are not emotionally connected to their workplace and less likely to put in discretionary effort. The actively disengaged are emotionally alienated, and prone to break safety rules, exhibit more at-risk behavior, and jeopardize the safety of coworkers.

To avoid resistance in your attempts to engage your employees in safety activities, here are mistakes to avoid. All are de-motivators:

• Mistake: Make your safety committee responsible for safety performance, instead of senior leadership. Don’t relieve senior leaders and supervisors of their safety accountabilities.

• Mistake: Turn observation and feedback processes into “gotcha” schemes that emphasize catching employees doing the wrong thing. Most observations should recognize positive safe behaviors, and most feedback to employees should be positive, not punitive. Catch employees doing the “right things.”

• Mistake: Turn accident investigations into “blame games.” Focus on fixing system problems that create safety problems. Don’t focus on fixing people.

• Mistake: Underfund safety initiatives. Actions – and resource support – speak louder than platitudes about how important safety is. Don’t say “safety first” and then place tight restrictions on the scope of safety committees, the time committee members can spend on safety, their freedom to speak up about safety problems, and the money budgeted for them to work with.

• Mistake: Judge your workplace’s safety performance solely on the basis on injury and illness statistics. Accident facts are reactive measurements that focus on failures, not what the company is doing proactively to prevent accidents from happening in advance. Factor in positive metrics such as the number of hazards identified and abated, the number of new safety initiatives launched each quarter or each year, the number of near-miss or close call reports filed. There are many more positive metrics to be found in safety literature.

• Mistake: Fail to follow through on safety suggestions, safety complaints, safety audit findings. Senior leadership’s apathy or neglect here is a credibility and trust killer.

**The psychology of engagement**

Finally, when addressing new hires and veteran employees about how an engaged workforce contributes to superior safety performance, take into account the three beliefs that Virginia Tech psychology professor Dr. E. Scott Geller says determine degrees of engagement: 1) Self-efficacy: “Can I do it?” 2) Response-efficacy: “Will it work?” 3) Outcome-expectancy: “Is it worth it?”

The answers to all three questions hinge on both external environmental factors and internal states of mind. If senior leadership is silent on safety, being disengaged from safety themselves, an employee is likely to believe that 1) No, I’m not capable of engagement in this negative culture; 2) Engagement will not work; and 3) Engagement is not worth the time and effort.

Internal personal feelings also play a critical factor. Geller identifies five: 1) Self-esteem, “I am valuable;” “I care about myself;” 2) Self-efficacy, “I can do it;” “I am capable;” “I have the skills;” 3) Personal control, “I am in control;” “I am not constantly being told what to do;” 4) Optimism, “I expect the best;” and 5) Belongingness, “I care about my team and my employer.”

To promoted what Geller calls “actively caring,” these five feeling states need to be bolstered, reinforced and encouraged. One way of doing this is to adopt a family perspective among work colleagues, according to Geller. These five “person-states” as Geller calls them influence being more engaged on the job when, among other actions, we use more rewards than penalties, as we do with family members; likewise, we don’t pick on the mistakes of family members; we don’t rank one family member against another; we respect the property and personal space of family members; we correct undesirable behavior of family members; we accept corrective feedback from family members; and we are interdependent with family members.

Geller’s use of family dynamics to help cultivate on-the-job engagement and engagement with safety activities and values is reflected in a study of award-winning safety programs conducted by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) in the 1970s. NIOSH found that superior safety performance most often came about in work cultures where a “family feeling” was present and felt by employees. These workplaces tended to be smaller, with less than 250 employees, and were privately owned by managers who were on a first-name basis with their employees. Manager had many “safety contacts” with individual employees.

Perhaps you work in a much larger organization. Positive forms of engagement for the benefit of safety and other business outcomes is still quite possible if you direct your activities on a smaller scale – targeting individual departments, work shifts, work teams, work cells, and through the use of small-scale environments such as safety meetings, safety committees, and safety training sessions.