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NAC Executive Insights

Safety Culture Series

Safety Culture — Worker Participation in the Safety Management System (SMS)

Key Points

- Worker participation in safety management systems (SMS) is critical to SMS success.
- Clear benefits can be realized by including workers in defining SMS elements.
- Sound strategies exist for worker participation and involvement.
- Success in worker participation is not without challenges and barriers.
- Methods for overcoming these challenges are available.
- Adjustments to the SMS are necessary and should occur with worker input.

Introduction

This Executive Insight explores the importance of including worker participation and involvement in defining the elements of the safety management system (SMS) and making necessary adjustments. Worker participation enhances safety culture, improves hazard identification, and increases overall safety performance. This Executive Insight highlights the benefits of worker involvement, strategies for promoting participation, challenges faced, and methods to overcome those challenges. It also discusses how to make necessary adjustments to the SMS based on worker input, emphasizing continuous improvement and incorporating lessons learned.

Health and safety are of utmost importance in any workplace. Establishing a comprehensive safety management system can contribute significantly to the welfare of employees and to the overall success of an organization. An effective SMS can reduce incidents, improve productivity, and foster a positive workplace culture. While management plays a crucial role in developing and implementing these systems, worker participation and involvement are equally important. Employee participation is crucial in formulating a successful SMS, as they are the ones who directly encounter and manage risks daily. Workers possess valuable firsthand knowledge and experience, making their input essential for creating effective safety systems. This Executive Insight explores the significance of including workers in defining safety management system elements and making necessary adjustments to enhance safety outcomes.

Importance of Worker Participation in Safety Management Systems

Worker participation is a fundamental aspect of a robust safety management system. The workers represent the frontline defense against workplace hazards, making their participation in the system an integral aspect of maintaining safety and health standards. Participation empowers workers, fostering a culture of safety and ownership.

Benefits of Including Workers in Defining SMS Elements

Including workers in defining safety management system elements offers numerous advantages. First, involving workers in safety decision-making instills a sense of ownership and responsibility, leading to increased safety awareness and commitment. It also enhances hazard identification and risk assessment processes. Workers can help identify risks, devise control measures, and suggest improvements in current systems. Workers possess valuable firsthand knowledge and insights regarding workplace conditions, equipment, and processes. Their active participation ensures that potential hazards are effectively identified and addressed.

Moreover, involving workers increases their commitment to safety. When workers have a say in defining safety rules and procedures, they are more likely to comply with them and actively participate in safety initiatives. This, in turn, fosters a positive safety culture and reduces the likelihood of accidents and incidents.

Additionally, worker participation improves the effectiveness of safety training programs. Workers can provide input on the relevance and effectiveness of training materials, allowing for tailored and more engaging programs that address specific workplace needs.

Strategies for Worker Participation and Involvement

Open, inclusive dialogue is the cornerstone of successful worker participation. A platform should be created where workers feel comfortable and empowered to voice their observations and suggestions related to safety issues. Regular safety meetings and an open-door policy for safety concerns can foster an atmosphere of trust and cooperation. This inclusive dialogue should extend to all levels of the organization, promoting a culture of safety that is embedded in the everyday activities of the organization.

Several strategies can be implemented to encourage worker participation and involvement in safety management systems:

- **Training and Education:** Comprehensive safety training and education programs provide workers with the knowledge and skills to actively participate in safety initiatives. Involving workers in the SMS requires equipping them with the knowledge and skills needed to effectively

contribute to safety management. Regular training and education sessions are essential, not just on safety protocols, but also on risk perception, decision-making, and problem-solving related to safety issues. Training must emphasize the importance of worker input, hazard identification, and risk mitigation. Training and education can help workers understand their role in the SMS and enhance their ability to contribute.

- **Safety Committees or Teams:** Establishing safety committees or teams comprising representatives from different work areas fosters collaboration and provides a platform for workers to voice their concerns, suggest improvements, and contribute to safety-related decisions.
- **Worker Involvement in Risk Assessment:** Risk assessment is a key component of the SMS. Including workers in this process helps ensure hazards are not overlooked and risks are adequately understood. Workers, given their firsthand experience with the tasks and processes, can provide valuable insights into potential risks and suitable mitigation measures. This active involvement also increases their understanding of risks and their commitment to control measures.
- **Worker Participation in Incident Investigation**: When incidents occur, workers are included in the investigation process. Their input is crucial in identifying what went wrong and how similar incidents can be avoided. This involvement helps workers understand the implications of safety breaches and fosters a sense of accountability and commitment to maintaining a safe work environment.
- **Regular Communication Channels:** Implementing regular communication channels, such as safety meetings, suggestion boxes, or digital platforms, enables workers to provide feedback, report hazards, and share ideas for improving safety.
- **Anonymous Reporting Systems:** Creating anonymous reporting systems allows workers to report safety concerns or near misses without fear of reprisal. This encourages open communication and helps identify potential hazards that may otherwise go unnoticed.

Challenges and Barriers to Worker Participation

Despite the benefits of an SMS, several challenges and barriers can hinder effective worker participation in safety management systems. These include:

- Lack of worker empowerment and involvement in decision-making processes.
- Communication gaps between management and workers.
- Limited resources allocated for safety initiatives.
- Organizational culture that discourages worker input.
- Resistance to change and lack of trust.

Overcoming Challenges and Promoting Worker Involvement

Addressing SMS challenges requires a commitment from top management. They must provide the leadership to create a culture that values safety and encourages worker participation. To overcome challenges and promote worker involvement, organizations should consider the following strategies:

- **Leadership Support and Commitment:** Demonstrating leadership support and commitment to worker participation in safety management fosters a culture that values worker input. Management must actively encourage and facilitate worker involvement.
- **Clear Roles and Responsibilities:** Clearly defining roles and responsibilities of management, supervisors, and workers in safety processes ensures accountability by everyone and results in effective participation.
- **Recognizing and Rewarding Contributions:** Incentive programs, public acknowledgments, and other ways of recognizing and rewarding workers' contributions to safety initiatives encourage active participation and reinforce a positive safety culture.

Making Necessary Adjustments to the Safety Management System

No SMS is perfect. Rather, it is continually adjusted and improved upon. Encouraging workers to report unsafe conditions or practices and involving them in developing solutions lead to a more resilient SMS. Worker input is crucial in making the necessary adjustments to meet the changing needs and conditions of the organization. This requires an open feedback loop from all employees since they are in direct contact with potential hazards. The following approaches facilitate this process:

- **Continuous Improvement Processes:** Implementing continuous improvement processes, such as Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) or Lean Six Sigma, allows organizations to systematically evaluate safety performance, identify areas for improvement, and make necessary adjustments.

> Lean Six Sigma – a process improvement approach that uses a collaborative team effort to improve performance by systematically removing operational waste and reducing process variation. It combines Lean Management and Six Sigma to increase the velocity of value in business processes.

- **Feedback Loops and Evaluation Mechanisms:** Establishing feedback loops and evaluation mechanisms such as safety audits, incident investigations, and worker surveys enables organizations to gather valuable input for refining SMS elements.
- **Incorporating Lessons Learned:** Incorporating lessons learned from incidents, near misses, and worker feedback into the safety management system helps

prevent similar incidents in the future. Regular reviews and updates ensure the SMS remains effective and aligned with changing workplace conditions.

Conclusion

Worker participation and involvement in defining the elements of the SMS and making necessary adjustments are essential for creating effective and robust safety systems. Engaging workers in safety decision-making improves hazard identification, increases safety awareness, and fosters a positive safety culture. Strategies such as training, safety committees, regular communication, and anonymous reporting systems promote worker participation. Overcoming challenges and barriers requires leadership support from management, clearly defined roles, and recognizing worker contributions. Making necessary adjustments based on worker input ensures continuous improvement and prevents accidents in the workplace. By embracing worker participation in establishing an SMS, organizations can achieve higher safety standards and protect the well-being of their workforce.

For Further Reading – Safety Culture Series (Executive Insights)

- Introduction to the Safety Culture Series
- Safety Culture – Human Performance Principles

About the Author

Craig Martin was elected to the National Academy of Construction in 2020. Craig is the retired president and CEO of Jacobs, one of the world's largest providers of construction services. He has contributed significantly throughout his career in creating positive safety cultures, creating the BeyondZero® corporate safety campaign that reshaped organizational culture. For his efforts and the resulting success of the program, the National Safety Council magazine, *Safety + Health*®, named him as one of 10 "CEOs Who Get It." Craig also helped form the Incident & Injury Free (IIF) Executive Forum, a twice yearly gathering of industry senior executives who meet to share strategies on safety.

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