Motivating Employees for Safety Improvement: Reaching from the Shop Floor to the Boardroom

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Introduction

Throughout the 1990's many organizations focused their safety efforts on the front-line employee – and many became good at engaging the field and the shop floor in active safety roles. In recent years, we've seen the focus shift to the safety leader – including the safety manager, the plant manager, the head of HSE, and even the CEO. As organizations expand the scope of safety, what happens next? Is it possible to integrate these methods into one comprehensive process that engages all employees and provides motivation for safety improvement at all levels?

The active inclusion of leaders in safety activities raises new questions about what engagement means; what it is, how to achieve it, and what sustains it across diverse functions and locations. While workers are present at the point of exposure and are critical to safety improvement, they are limited in the scope of their impact. Leaders, on the other hand, can make decisions about resources and organizational direction, but are limited in their ability to enact the particulars of day-to-day work at the front line. Getting safety right means engaging the right levels in the right way.

This article discusses the safety interests and perspectives that are shared by senior leaders, supervisors, labor representatives, and board members, and how to motivate employee engagement at each level.

Understanding Motivation

The closest thing to magic in organizational change is getting individuals excited about what is going on. Most organizations have multiple competing priorities at all times. There are relentless cost and production-efficiency pressures. There are fewer people and more things to do. Time is at an absolute premium. Under these conditions, motivation can make the difference between success and failure. In safety, motivation opens the door to fluency in critical systems, the ability to detect patterns in leading indicators, and the vision to accelerate and advance performance beyond the status quo.

Simply speaking, the problem of motivation is one of generating motion. Derived from the Latin *movere* ("to move"), we use motivation to describe of state of being in motion toward a goal. In safety performance, we say the motivated employee (or line manager or CEO) is one who is actively pursuing the goal of safety improvement. He or she is engaging in the work of improving safety; using safety systems, talking about safety performance, advocating the interests of safety in light of other priorities, and so on. In this sense, the motivation we are talking about is an active state. Motivation is also spoken about in another sense; the internal drive or interest someone has for working toward an objective. In this sense, motivation can be active (the leader is interested in safety and is actively engaging in it) or inactive (the leader is interested in safety, but is not engaging in it.)

This distinction is important to understand for addressing motivation to improve safety; it explains why I can feel safety is important yet participate very little or not at all. Interestingly, this distinction is manifested in the perceptions employees at all levels voice about the intentions and motivations of employees at other levels. We often hear that it's the "other level" that needs to be motivated. Managers might complain that front-line employees don't pay attention to safety, or front-line employees that leadership "just doesn't get it". In fact, *both are **already** motivated.* What's occurring is that the existing intrinsic motivation of these groups has not been harnessed or channeled appropriately. An effective engagement strategy recognizes this distinction; lack of participation does not mean lack of interest. Our task is to find out how to translate that interest into motion.

Approaches to Motivation

Generating true motivation for safety improvement has been a hotly debated topic for years. The discussion has centered on two questions: What constitutes meaningful (as opposed to superficial) involvement in safety activities? And, what method or methods best generates this genuine participation in safety? Most people would recognize that participation in activities in themselves does not necessarily indicate motivation; I can "go through the motions" of attending a safety meeting, for instance, without actually contributing to the advancement of safety objectives. What people usually mean when they talk about creating motivation around safety is that they want to create interest and participation in safety on a *personal* level. That is, whether I'm a leader or a front-line employee, safety is personally important to me and I act within the organization because of, and on behalf of, that interest.

How then, do we generate such motivation? The various approaches and methods fall into roughly two categories: transactional and transformational. Transactional approaches seek to generate motivation by offering something in exchange for a person's work and interest in safety improvement. Activities in this category include bonuses or awards for group performance, incentives for the performance of safety activities, and including safety as a metric in a leader's performance and compensation. The second approach, transformational, seeks to generate motivation by engaging the person in the work itself.

<u>Transactional Motivation</u>

In our experience, transactional motivation (safety incentives) produces mixed results. Not to be confused with recognition activities, which are used to acknowledge and celebrate safety achievements after the fact, incentives are designed specifically to try and create those achievements. Incentives most often take the form of offering individual or group goods, merchandise, or cash contingent either on outcomes (such as incident frequency) or participation in safety activities. At the hourly employee level, particularly when the contingency is incident frequency, they can actually create more harm than good. Outcomes-based incentives reward me (or punish me) for things over which I have little control, such as the practices of a workgroup on another shift. Experience shows that such systems can discourage reporting of injuries, encourage the "creative classification" of incidents, provide weak feedback and reinforcement for safety activities, and create a sense of entitlement that taints the value of safety performance.

Even when the incentives are tied to inherently worthwhile activities (for instance, safety observations or hazard reduction), offering an exchange undermines the integrity of these activities over the long term. In effect, we are treating these activities as something extra, rather than as part of how work here is performed. In this case, the incentive stimulates the "mechanical" action (going to the safety meeting, performing the observation, etc.) without assuring that the activity is impactful or sustainable. The perceived reason for doing the activity shifts from the real benefit of the activity to the "reward" — and if the reward is withdrawn, there is no apparent reason left for continuing the activity. Using this approach, we create a culture where safety is trivialized, instead of one where safety is valued and an important measure of business on par with production or profitability.

Interestingly, safety incentives at the senior level can actually be effective to a certain extent; leaders are more often in control of the means to achieve outcomes and are ultimately responsible for them. Even there, however, transactional motivation can foster an overemphasis on tactical thinking. If I am measured and compensated on a specific metric (for instance recordable rates or workers comp cases), I am more likely to focus on that area to the exclusion of larger issues, such as the real values needed to be an effective safety leader. While it is desirable to hold leaders accountable to specific outcomes (and therefore send the message that their leadership in safety is needed), relying on these measures alone misses an important opportunity to motivate leaders at an intrinsic level.

Ultimately, transactional motivation is unsatisfactory because it fails to address the fundamental motives that drive engagement in any work activity. As pointed out by Herzberg and others, the most important work-related motivating factors do not have to do with pay, benefits, or other external elements. These things are important, but providing them actually only brings the organization to a neutral position. What's most important to driving interest in work performance is achievement, recognition, and the work itself. Financial and other tangible incentives, while potentially compelling in the short term, do not appeal to this drive for the long term; by themselves, they cannot generate motivation on a personal level.

Transformational Motivation

In our experience, the more effective method of motivation is the engagement of the employee, leader, or group in the actual process of improving safety. Engagement motivation focuses on getting people at each level connected to the safety processes of the organization, having them

feel ownership and involvement, and being actively doing things on behalf of safety improvement. The employee is connected to the work on a personal level.

Engagement motivation is the connection between the multi-levels of the person — the intellectual, emotional, creative, and psychological — and the work they are doing. The most effective way to do this is to involve them, to give them actual responsibilities in making the mechanisms and process work. Most organizations learned this lesson in the '80s and '90s doing quality improvement. But as other changes became necessary – new leaders, new technology, new challenges –the lesson was lost to many. We have seen this lesson reemerge particularly in multi-site safety interventions where the engagement of employees catches the attention of both leaders and individual contributors. Ironically, this involvement could well have been lost because it requires so much time from employees – time no one has. But, like physical exercise, doing more ends up being less. As the body gets in shape, new energy emerges.

What Safety Means: Understanding Intrinsic Motivations

What does motivation through engagement actually look like? Clearly, engagement is more difficult to cultivate initially than a transactional approach; it is not as simple as devising a program or writing a list of accountabilities. It is, however more self-sustaining because it appeals to the intrinsic drives, interests, and perspectives that these groups have. Engagement, by definition, must take the form of activities appropriate to each level of the organization. It would not be practical, or even necessarily desirable, to expect the CEO to perform hazard analysis or for a line manager to direct safety resources. In order to know how to engage each level, then, we must first understand *what safety is to them.* And it's quite different at each level.

Senior-Most/C-Level Leaders

Senior-most leaders are concerned with fatalities first and foremost. Some more than others, some from experience, which is a hard teacher, but as a group senior leaders are moved by fatalities in their organizations. Most find the fact that fatal accidents are preventable and yet continue to exist in their organizations unacceptable. For those who aren't yet motivated the key question is, Was is necessary that this life be lost? In other words, *Are fatal accidents a part of doing business, or can they be prevented?*

In addition to preventing fatalities, senior leaders are also concerned with getting things done competently. When safety managers say that they have trouble getting "management support", the scenario is most likely that they have failed to demonstrate their competency in really making a difference. The senior leaders holds back more from fear that resources will be used ineffectively than from lack of interest in real prevention.

On a personal level, senior leaders are motivated to improve safety because somewhere deep down they realize it's the right thing to do. For them, it is an ethical consideration. Safety also complements the task a leader has to promote sustainability: creating an organization that is responsible and that cares for its resources. Engaging senior leaders, and therefore motivating them, is about showing them how they can effect safety outcomes, and the wellbeing of the

organization, directly through their actions, decisions, and beliefs, and indirectly through their support.

Hourly Employees

The front-line employee is concerned with their own wellbeing in the present day-to-day activity of their job. They have seen other people hurt, sometimes seriously, and they see the potential for injury, the exposure to risk on a daily basis. For them it is personal. Safety means not getting injured personally and not seeing one's friends and coworkers get injured. The hourly worker understands how the company views safety from their day-to-day experience. Not in attending meeting where leaders talk about their commitment to safety, but in the workplace itself where they see how the organization responds to exposure. Does the organization respond promptly to identified hazards? Are safety suggestions appreciated and valued? Are safety meetings conducted well? Do new employees get adequate safety training? Do first-line supervisors model safe behavior? The list goes on, but the main point is that safety isn't about what people say, it's about what they do.

What does this tell us about how to engage the hourly employee in safety, and thereby how to motivate him or her? It says that we should look for opportunities to have hourly employees participate in safety improvement activities, that participation in itself will be motivating. Lead a safety meeting, do a safety observation, fix a safety problem, make a suggestion, give feedback to another employee. *Involvement is motivation.*

First-Line Supervisor

As a first-line supervisor or team leader, safety to me means keeping my people from getting hurt. To this level, an injured employee is an individual, not a statistic. Given this, one might think that supervisors would be among the strongest natural allies of safety efforts. Supervisors, however, often do not have the skills they need to be effective in this role; employees are often promoted to supervisory positions because of technical proficiency rather than management skill, and even within the same organization, variation among supervisors in their skills and motivation in safety can be very high.

To engage supervisors and team leaders, it is essential first to develop their leadership skills, and create awareness of their importance to safety performance and their points of influence. Engagement for this level takes the form of talking to employees, observing how work is done, observing hazards, and responding to identified hazards.

Plant Manager

Much like the senior leader, plant managers are concerned with fatalities and with ensuring that resources are well used. But unless the plant is very large and the work very hazardous, the number of fatalities will be low even if the workplace is not safe. Plant managers must understand the relationship of exposure events to injury events. And to do that, they need to understand leading indicators: measures of variables that can be shown to have a statistically valid, predictive relationship to injury frequency.

Engaging plant managers means providing them the leading indicators that tell them where exposures are occurring, involving them in the oversight of the site's safety systems and mechanisms, and involving them in finding solutions to safety issues.

Labor Representatives

Assuring worker safety is central to the labor leader's interest and one of the imperatives that guides union leaders' actions; they want to keep their members safe. Labor representatives are also interested in finding common ground and objective with management on the quality of working conditions. Engaging these leaders means giving them a role to play in safety activities, soliciting their input on safety decisions, and finding joint safety issues on which to collaborate.

Leading for Motivation

Intrinsic motivations give us a starting point for creating engagement at various levels within the organization. But how does this engagement actually occur? In some organizations, employees are easily engaged, rise to the challenge, and even give discretionary time to assure that goals are met. In others, engagement can seem nearly impossible; safety efforts meet resistance, and employees at all levels seem unwilling to extend themselves. Even when we appeal to the intrinsic motivations that different individuals have, something more is needed.

The Role of Culture

Engagement does not occur in a vacuum. Individuals usually have long histories with each other, with their manager, and with the organization as a whole. At the front-line level, a series of supervisors may have come and gone, and each one probably focused on one area and neglected others. Leaders at the top of the organization may have changed out as well, bringing with them directives and initiatives that lasted only until their next assignment. On average, an individual employee has probably had thousands of interactions with his manager and peers. These interactions tell employees what is important to others in the organization, how they are likely to be treated in various circumstances, and whether others are likely to do what they say they will do.

An individual's experience with the organization congeals into a set of perceptions, or beliefs, about the way things are. These beliefs influence how he or she behaves, and they define the organization's culture and safety climate. Perhaps surprisingly, the success of most change efforts depends more on perceptions about some basic aspects of organizational life than on perceptions specific to the area to be changed; improvements in safety at the front-line level depend more on workers' perceptions of how they are treated by their supervisor than on perceptions of the importance of safety in the organization.

Leadership, Motivation & Culture

Whether engagement come easily or is almost impossible to achieve depends on the atmosphere – the safety climate and organizational culture — that leadership creates. When these things are right, engagement becomes easy. What then constitutes the right environment? And what specific things do leaders need to do to in order to allow engagement and motivation to thrive?

There are several culture dimensions critical to high performance in safety, which can be grouped into team, safety-specific, and organizational dimensions. Of these, the scales belonging to the organizational dimension are the most fundamental to setting the stage for engagement:

- **Procedural Justice** reflects the extent to which the individual perceives fairness in the supervisor's decision-making process. Leaders enhance perceptions of procedural justice when they make decisions characterized by consistency across persons and time, lack of bias, accuracy (decisions are based on good information and informed opinion), correctableness (decisions can be appealed), respresentativeness (the procedure reflects the concerns, values and outlook of those affected), and ethicality.
- **Leader-Member Exchange** reflects the relationship the employee has with his or her supervisor. In particular, this scale measures the employee's level of confidence that his supervisor will go to bat for him and look out for his interests. Leaders can enhance perceptions of leader-member exchange by developing positive working relationships with their reports and getting each person to see how achieving organizational goals as fulfilling to both the leader and to himself.
- **Management Credibility** reflects the perception of the employee that what management says is consistent with what management does. Leader behaviors that influence perceptions of trustworthiness include consistency, integrity (telling the truth, keeping promises), sharing control in decision-making and through delegation, communication, and benevolence (demonstration of concern).
- **Perceived Organizational Support** describes the perception of employees that the organization cares about them, values them, and supports them. The extent to which employees believe the organization is concerned with their needs and interests strongly influences their likelihood that they will go the extra mile. Leaders can demonstrate organizational support by effecting and communicating efforts that go well beyond what is required.

These factors form a foundation on which engagement and motivation, as well as the other critical cultural characteristics, are based. Three of these factors (Leader-Member Exchange, Management Credibility, and Perceived Organizational Support) can be understood from social exchange theory. This theory says that important aspects of relationships (between individuals, or between an individual and a group) can be viewed as a series of exchanges or interactions in which the principle of reciprocity plays a central role. For example, if an employee is treated with dignity and respect and offered support by his or her supervisor, the likelihood increases that the employee will reciprocate; job performance, extra-role behavior, and loyalty will tend to increase. On the other hand, if the worker feels demeaned or disrespected, he is much less likely to fully engage in the work.

The Comprehensive Approach

Clearly, a single, comprehensive approach to engagement throughout the organization, across various levels, locations, and functions is possible. And it is a function of leadership. Leaders must understand the specific mechanisms that drive safety performance, the action points that will engage each level in running and supporting these safety systems, and finally, how their own decisions, beliefs, communications, and actions (their personal engagement) enable motivation.

The motivation starts with a core group of leaders who have influence over the organization and who get aligned on what they really value, and what principles represent those values. Then they need to know what behaviors of theirs are necessary to convey to the organization that they are serious about change and to stimulate the right behaviors among other leaders. There must be consistency across leadership on saying and doing the right things: making the right decisions, communicating the right information, and articulating the right vision. When they do this, they immediately change the safety climate into one in which engagement becomes easy. And they begin the process of transforming the culture into one that fosters motivation for safety excellence.

Getting Safety Right

When leaders take on safety in a serious way, they must necessarily tackle the issue of motivation. Getting safety right requires everyone's willing participation — and more than their participation, their active and wholehearted engagement. Without widespread motivation, the leader's intentions become mere inclinations; noble ideas that have no legs in the organization at large. Safety leaders must understand both the particular roles and interests that each level of the organization has in safety as well as how they can create a culture in which those motivations can be manifested and sustained. Successfully done, leaders enable not only widespread and meaningful motivation for safety improvement, they also create a foundation for cultural unity and performance excellence generally.

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