

EFFECTIVELY MANAGING WORKPLACE SAFETY AND HEALTH

As a business owner or manager, safety and health issues do not have to be an overwhelming concern. The possibility of inspectors from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) knocking on your door does not have to rule your thoughts on a continual basis if you effectively manage safety and health.

Most successful companies doing business in America today recognize the importance of managing safety and health issues within their organizations just like they manage other facets of their businesses. In an article titled: *Measuring Safety's Return on Investment (2001)*, Susan Jervis and Terry R. Collins, the argument is made that [there is a direct correlation between a company's safety performance and its subsequent performance in productivity and financial results](#). In the article titled: *OSHA's Voluntary Protection Program A Key to More Competitive Business (2009)*, estimated that 1,345 of the sites involved with VPP saved a total of \$300 million in costs associated with reduced injuries and illnesses. Owners and managers of small businesses that do not have professional health and safety staff often struggle with regulatory safety requirements and expenses associated with high injury rates such as workers compensation insurance costs, lost time, and re-training. These direct and indirect costs are liabilities that continue to plague many businesses. For these companies, an effectively managed safety and health program, using recommendations from experts in the field, can turn these liabilities into dividends on the bottom line.

Aside from regulatory pressures that owners and managers face, many smaller firms continue to

The value of management and employee participation

have workers compensation rates that are unbelievably high. Many owners and managers continue to view these high premiums as a necessary cost of doing business. Businesses of every type and size have demonstrated this does not have to be the case. Many of them have proactively managed safety and health and reduced their costs considerably.

MANAGE SAFETY AND HEALTH PROACTIVELY

Developing a proactive safety and health management program requires a small investment in time and effort that can pay off in the long run. In fact, OSHA's Office of Regulatory Analysis has stated: *"...companies that implement effective safety and health plans expect reductions of 20% or greater in their injury and illness rates and a return of \$4 to \$6 for every \$1 invested..."* Instead of managing safety in a reactive manner (e.g. after an incident), apply the same principles to safety and health that you apply to managing your accounting, inventory and production activities and manage it proactively. Both OSHA officials and safety and health professionals alike recommend the following elements be present for an effectively managed program:

- Management commitment
- Employee involvement
- Worksite analysis
- Hazard prevention and control
- Safety and health training

See how much an injury costs your business directly and indirectly at OSHA's [Safety Pays](#) site:

[OSHA's Safety Pays](#)

MANAGEMENT COMMITMENT

Companies who are successful in making safety and health an integral part of workplace culture have strong management commitment to their safety and health programs. This commitment is often illustrated in a written document that provides a guiding philosophy for everyone in the company. This document usually indicates the rank of safety and health relative to other business activities. For successful companies, it is a top priority. In addition to placing this commitment in writing, senior-level managers must actively communicate this policy to subordinates on a regular basis. Also, they must ensure that middle line managers and supervisors relay this commitment to employees, both through communications and their actions. Additionally, managers must be empowered with the authority to discipline employees who are not following company health and safety policies when necessary. Owners and managers must create a safety and health culture through policy, communications and actions – it does not just happen.

Managers must create a safety and health culture through policy, communications and actions

EMPLOYEE INVOLVEMENT

Often, employee involvement in health and safety in the workplace is singularly associated with safety committees or teams. This traditional approach can be effective but it has drawbacks due to Federal Labor laws that discourage management “coercion”. In addition, traditional safety committees have often been ineffective because it is rare that employees are given adequate authority to get things done. Also, they are rarely evaluated on their performance because participation on the committee is typically voluntary.

Employee involvement has been shown to be more effective and worthwhile when it is combined with other activities. These may include participation in planning new facilities, building and/or equipment upgrades, assigning duties and responsibilities involving health and safety in everyday operations, and specific evaluations and rewards based on their successful completion of these duties.

For example, a client of ours that processes and repacks fresh produce inquired about constant slipping hazards created by discarded product on the floor of the facility. Traditional means of instruction, command, and control management structure resulted in employees who did not want to take ownership of their work space; they perceived that their duties only involved processing and boxing the product, not cleaning up the floor around them. Production employees felt that those duties fell under the jurisdiction of the janitorial staff. Suggestions were made to inform all employees about the hazards and the number of

injuries related to slipping and falling. Direct and indirect costs associated with the resultant injuries, lost time, re-training of employees and escalating workers compensation rates were also presented to the employees. Then, a senior manager informed all of the employees that they had the authority and the responsibility to maintain the floors in the facility

so that discarded produce did not create a hazard. Not only would they have the authority and the responsibility, they would also be held accountable and evaluated on their response to the challenge. As might be expected, the employees responded enthusiastically and injuries due to slips and falls were reduced significantly. This is only one example of how employees can actively be involved in safety and health.

Employee involvement is effective only when the employer welcomes it and provides protection from any discrimination, including harassment of the employees involved. Employee participation must be encouraged, followed-up on, and rewarded by management.

WORKSITE ANALYSIS

When do many small business owners and managers look for safety hazards in their facilities? Often, this is a reactive procedure. After someone gets hurt, they search for answers as to why it happened.

Here is another opportunity for you as a business owner or manager to involve your employees in health and safety. Most hazards that result in injuries do not take a rocket scientist to identify – just someone who has a bit of training in hazard recognition, is at least moderately familiar with the company’s activities, and who knows that the owner wants them to be looking for hazards all the time. Of course, it always helps to identify and recognize their efforts when they do a good job.

Numerous tools are available for business owners to provide basic training to employees on hazard recognition. The easiest may be short checklists for specific topics ranging from access and egress in emergencies to electrical hazards to use of toxic substances. These types of tools are already available to clients of Hellman & Associates so you do not have to create them from scratch.

Utilize these tools to give basic training to all employees regarding hazard recognition. Communicate your expectations that everyone identify and report or correct hazards they have

Follow up shows your employees you appreciate their participation

observed or heard about. Employees should be expected to correct hazards if they are capable as long as correcting the issue does not cause unnecessary risk to the employee. For instance, if an employee notices that a trash can has been left in front of an exit door, he or she should not have to report it to a supervisor; instead, he or she should take the initiative and move it. Employers should ensure that employees have an adequate means for bringing larger issues to the attention of appropriate personnel for timely correction.

If your safety and health program and culture are mature, employees should feel free to bring these issues to the forefront. If you are just starting, be aware that there may be employees who are resistant or who do not want to “rat” on others. This will likely be the case, even if you feel your employees are very open and willing to share. Employers should implement a system for employees to anonymously report concerns. As your program matures and employees are actively involved, the anonymous mechanism may not be necessary; but, it will encourage participation initially.

Finally, ensure that all issues are promptly addressed. This may be done by discussing issues with employees and prioritizing a list of identified issues and corrections. Serious issues must be placed at the top of the action item list and corrected in a timely manner. By following up on identified issues, you have shown your employees that you appreciated their participation in helping to maintain a workplace free of safety and health issues. In return, employees will continue to actively participate in identifying and correcting safety concerns. Do not ignore issues or you reduce the likelihood of employee participation and support

HAZARD PREVENTION AND CONTROL

Hazard prevention and control can be accomplished through a variety of methods. Some of these include:

- Local exhaust ventilation of airborne contaminants
- Adequate machine guarding
- Developing safe work practices into standard operating procedures
- Provision of adequate personal protective equipment
- Preventative maintenance on machines and equipment
- Planning and preparing for emergencies

Hazard prevention and control requires pre-planning for new equipment, processes, or facilities. This may require professional input from engineers, industrial hygiene or safety professionals and other trade experts. In all cases, it should involve input

from the employees who will be directly impacted by the changes (e.g. operations and maintenance personnel).

In existing operations, facilities, and processes, new hazards may present themselves because of changes in production, scheduling, or personnel. First line supervisors should be aware of new (or newly recognized) hazards by soliciting management and employee involvement in identifying them and devising adequate solutions including engineering and administrative controls.

SAFETY AND HEALTH TRAINING

The ability of employees to recognize safety and health hazards depends upon their understanding and knowledge of potential hazards. It is important that they have a basic understanding of hazard potential, why the hazards pose a threat, how they can protect themselves, and take action to eliminate the hazards.

The extent of employee training required will vary, but includes at least:

- General hazards and safety rules at the worksite
- Specific hazards and safe work practices related to particular work assignments
- The employee’s role in emergency situations

Supervisors should be trained to ensure that they understand their specific safety and health responsibilities within the organization. These include:

- Analyzing the work under their supervision to identify potential hazards
- Maintaining implemented controls in their work areas
- Reinforcing employee training through continual performance feedback and, if necessary, through enforcement of safe work practices and safety rules

Managers should also be included in training so that they understand their safety and health responsibilities and so that they can actively communicate expectations to supervisors and employees.

SUMMARY

As a business owner or manager you can make safety pay, rather than letting it constrict the bottom line. A proactive safety and health management system helps you develop programs that will effectively reduce costs associated with workers compensation, insurance premiums, employee turnover and re-training and lost time due to injuries.

There are many resources available to help you learn more about proactively managing an effective safety and health program. Officials with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) published excellent guidelines and other helpful information on the agency's website at [OSHA Website](#). Please feel free to contact Hellman & Associates via our "[Ask the Expert](#)" feature for assistance in managing your health and safety needs.