

Employer finds conflicting safety perceptions

Resulting changes cut lost-time cases by 76%

Good intentions aren't enough with occupational safety and health programs, as a logging employer in Idaho discovered when it surveyed its employees about plant safety. The survey showed that the safety messages weren't getting through to employees, plus workers and administrators had vastly different impressions about the status of safety in the workplace.

Administrators couldn't understand why the company's safety record was poor and workers' compensation costs were so high. After all, the company had a sophisticated safety program of accident investigations, inspections, and regular safety meetings.

Company leaders felt they were doing the right things to make the workplace safe, says Bill Sanders, western division safety coordinator for Potlatch Corp. in Lewiston, ID. The company employs 7,000 people in several states for various steps in paper products manufacturing, including logging and lumber mill work.

"We all thought we were doing a great job, but we were less than satisfied with our safety record," Sanders says. "We decided to ask the hourly workers and see if maybe they had a different opinion."

A different opinion, indeed

It turns out that the line workers did indeed have a different opinion. Many of their responses to a company survey indicated that the safety system at the company was not working nearly as smoothly as administrators believed.

While humbling in a way, the employees' responses led to changes that helped the company's western division cut the number of lost time cases by 76% over three years and the number of lost workdays due to accidents by 90%. The survey and the resulting changes were not the only factors involved in those improvements, but Sanders says they were important.

"The perception survey forced us to look at things we hadn't looked at before," Sander says. "The survey was a catalyst for improvement."

Potlatch used the Human Systems Reliability Survey provided by The Reliability Group, a safety consulting firm in Miami. The 200-question survey was completed by about 20% of the hourly employees, who were selected at random but in equal proportions from all three work shifts and the company's different worksites in the western division.

The employees took about an hour to fill out the survey, which addressed 120 factors covering everything from job satisfaction to management's commitment to safety. To encourage honest answers, the employees were told not to put their names on the surveys, and the answers were sorted by a group of college students from a local college. The answers were then sent to The Reliability Group for analysis.

"We found that management had significantly different perceptions of a lot of these things from the hourly workers," Sanders says. "Workers from one unit to another also had very different perceptions."

For example, one issue that jumped off the page of survey results was recognition of employees' good work. Managers felt proud that they were careful to praise good work, handing out lots of safety awards and "attaboys" with a hearty slap on the back. The survey showed that workers felt their hard work was hardly noticed at all and that they needed much more recognition.

Company leaders agreed that employees' perceptions were the bottom line. Because a worker's state of mind has such great influence over safety, the state of safety in the workplace is no better than what the employees think it is.

"If that's what the employees see, that's reality," Sanders says. "We could argue all day about what our intent was, but this is reality."

A company newsletter reported these results of the survey:

- Individual and group recognition for good safety performance should be improved.
- Supervisors should spend more time helping subordinates complete their work through planning and solving problems, while also encouraging teamwork and communication.
- Less emphasis should be placed on authority and more on coaching.
- Management needs to develop ways to allow employees more authority and autonomy.
- More variety should be built into jobs.

- Equipment inspection should be improved.
- Employee selection, placement of employees, and performance appraisal systems should be reviewed.

Employees complained that safety incentives were awarded by group, ignoring individual accomplishments. They also said safety incentives did not appear to be fairly awarded. Employees also said they were likely to be blamed for accidents, regardless of the true cause, but managers disagreed.

The survey also revealed that workers felt safety committees were only marginally effective, with a third saying they didn't know how effective the committees were and 12% saying they were not effective at all. Fortunately, 90% of the workers surveyed knew that the company had safety committees, and 80% even knew one or more members of the safety committees.

Sixty percent of the employees felt they could trust the company to keep them fully advised on possible dangerous or unhealthy work conditions, but 14% said they could not trust the company to inform them.

Results typical of problems seen elsewhere

The experience at Potlatch is similar to that of many other employers, says Henry Sarkis, president of The Reliability Group and adjunct professor in the School of Business Administration at the University of Miami in Florida. Discrepancies in employee and management perceptions have become more pronounced in the past 10 years, he tells *Occupational Health Management*.

"What we've seen commonly in the past decade is that managers feel very confident they have done the right thing and can easily point out the accomplishments that they are proud of," Sarkis says. "We're seeing that employees often don't agree, and that is significant."

Even so, identifying management/employee discrepancies is not the only function of such a survey. It also can highlight differences within various employee groups. Identifying different perceptions between workers at two plants or opposite work shifts, for instance, could lead to an understanding of why their safety records also are different.

Potlatch found that employees had widely differing perceptions from one worksite to another. When asked about the likelihood of an on-the-job injury, workers in one plant might be most likely to reply that they don't expect to get hurt at work

because they can control their exposure to danger. In another worksite, workers might respond that injuries are just part of the job, a matter of "when," not "if," they get hurt.

Different working conditions would account for part of such a perceptual difference, but Potlatch managers saw the latter response as an indicator that the company's safety programs weren't having the desired impact.

"We realized that it doesn't help if we're working like crazy on some safety effort if we're totally off target," Sanders says. "Once you know how far apart you are from your employees, the goal is to narrow that gap so that everyone has a similar perception. That would mean you're communicating and working together as much as you should."

Benchmarking opportunity

Employees can be divided into groups who have had accidents or near accidents, and those who have not. Surveying their perceptions about the workplace could suggest what factors could be improved for the accident and near-accident group, Sarkis says. Often that group will reveal a higher stress level, more dissatisfaction with supervisors, or worse environmental hazards, such as poor illumination or a higher workplace temperature.

Workplace surveys also can provide benchmarking statistics, allowing the employer to take note of where the company stands on safety issues right now. That provides a base for assessing the results of any efforts at improvement.

I often tell people that where you are now is not as important as where you're heading," Sarkis says. "You can see where you are now and then do the survey a year later to see if you've made any improvements."

Potlatch took advantage of that opportunity, first taking steps to correct problems identified in the first survey and then conducting an almost identical survey a year later. As expected, the second survey showed improvement in many of the problem areas but also indicated that more time was necessary to correct the problems entirely.

After the first survey, the management of each worksite in the western division was charged with responding to the problems found in the survey, and most suggestions for improvement came from task forces composed of both hourly workers and managers. Plant managers and the task forces were encouraged to come up with creative solutions.

At one plant, for example, a vice president

invited 25 hourly employees and their spouses on a boat ride down the Snake River in Idaho. The employees were selected in recognition of their safety records and other contributions to the company, and the group held an informal brainstorming meeting after the trip. The event received substantial word-of-mouth publicity around the company, and other managers have instituted similar rewards for employees.

In another example, a task force of workers from one plant sought to address the common perception that injuries were inevitable. Since their type of lumber handling was innately dangerous, they decided that more safety education was the key. The hourly workers designed and produced their own safety video for their co-workers, showing how to minimize the chance of injury.

"That was the kind of thing that survey brought out for us," Sanders says. "We didn't know they felt so endangered, and without the survey, they wouldn't have been given the opportunity to solve the problem themselves. The workers put much more faith in the safety program now that they are directly involved instead of having management send down directives."