

# Safety improvement through people

By Chris Meakin

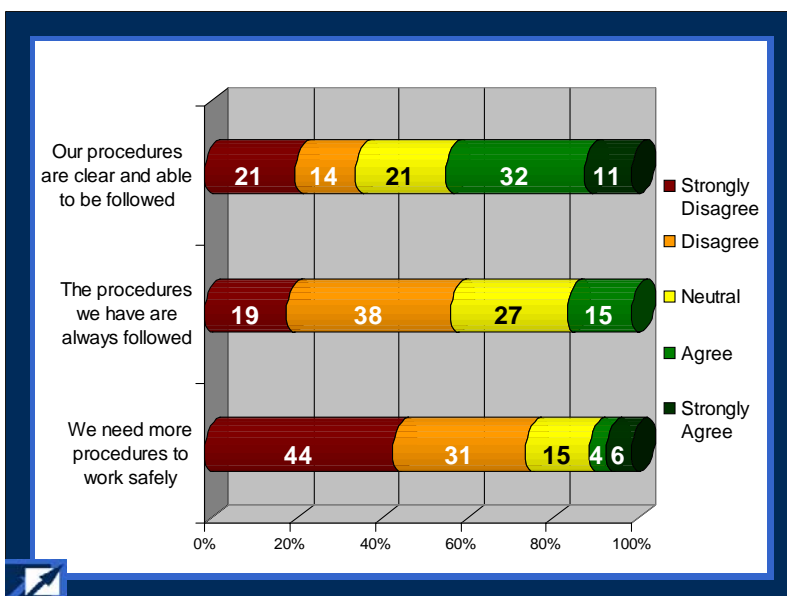
The senior managers of the organisation, working with the safety manager, have just put the finishing touches to the new safety initiative. It is well researched, and well thought through, now it's time to implement it. The expectation is that the initiative will help change the way people think about their safety at work.

There is a flurry of activity, meetings are held with senior managers in attendance, memos are emailed and put on notice boards, everyone knows about the latest and greatest. Six months later the management has to acknowledge that the initiative has not led to the expected improvement in safety performance; in fact it has disappeared almost without a trace. Is this scenario familiar? Why do genuinely good initiatives fail time and time again?

Most often the difference between successful and failed safety initiatives is the way people are engaged. Employees deprived of having a say in making their tasks safer are less likely to be motivated than employees who feel in control of their work.

The type of robust safety culture that fosters continuous improvement of safety performance requires shared values across the whole organisation. Such a culture rests on the understanding that it is people who make safety happen not systems and processes.

When safety management systems were introduced in the 1980s and the early 1990s, a dramatic drop in the number of injuries followed. Taking a systemic, risk-based approach has led to more planning and higher standards. However, after a number of years organisations that did not take the next steps inevitably plateaued.



Rules, regulations and procedures are only as good as the willingness of the people to apply them. If it is people who make safety happen then it is safety leadership that is the driver of a good a culture. The Lloyd-Jones Meakin Group (LJM) worked with a major manufacturing company who had recently commissioned a state of the art production facility. Engineers developed comprehensive work procedures and management hand picked employees to work in the plant. Leadership believed that the fundamentals were in place for a good safety culture.

However, when LJM surveyed employees, the results told a different story. Although the procedures had been developed and communicated, people did not necessarily follow them. Because safety systems were in place, management assumed that risks were being controlled.

If all the emphasis is on systems to keep people safe, employees will believe that their managers do not care about them. Managers need to engage with the people who work for them and demonstrate that the employees' safety will not be compromised for production targets or any other requirements. If the senior managers of the organisation only manage production and don't demonstrate leadership, the culture will reflect it and the focus will be on production.

So what is safety leadership? It means the ability to talk the talk and walk the walk. It means the ability to always behave in a way that inspires others to want to behave safely too. It means feeling and being able to express genuine concern for people and their well being.

This type of safety leadership does not come from policy statements hanging on the wall, however well thought through. It requires managers and supervisors to be out of their offices and engaging with people.

Employees look to their managers as role models and managers must lead by example. They set the standard with their own behaviour. Just consider how much more meaningful is a manager picking up some rubbish and disposing of it correctly than a manager issuing a memo about housekeeping.

Safety leaders understand that safety is not an add-on but is integrated into business processes. It's simply the way we do things around here. If a job is well planned, well resourced; the team are well trained, they understand the job, the associated risks and are able to control them, then the job will be done on time, within budget, with high quality and safely.

In other words, safety leadership also means good business and people management practices that deliver good results all round.

However important leadership is, leadership alone is not enough. Employees need to be equipped to do their jobs safely and that means having the standards defined and systems and processes in place. Employees need to be well trained and need to feel that their management will support them in every reasonable safety initiative. In such a culture there is trust between managers and employees, employees are empowered and feel ownership for safety and they will feel confident to look out for each other not just themselves.

Hands on safety leadership can also turn safety into a positive experience. It provides employees with an opportunity to regularly discuss safety issues with their managers and resolve issues before they become problems or before someone is hurt. Such a positive way of managing safety is much more meaningful than managers getting involved only when things go wrong.

It is not always easy for managers who have grown up in the old school to make the personal change that is necessary for this type of safety leadership. Frequently people at the operational level are more open to change than those with entrenched attitudes among managers. So, if you work in an organisation and you are not satisfied with the safety culture, look in the mirror and first ask if you are doing everything you can to make the workplace safe. Change your attitude and behaviour first, before you ask others to change.