

Safety Bulletin

Maximizing Worker Engagement in Occupational Safety

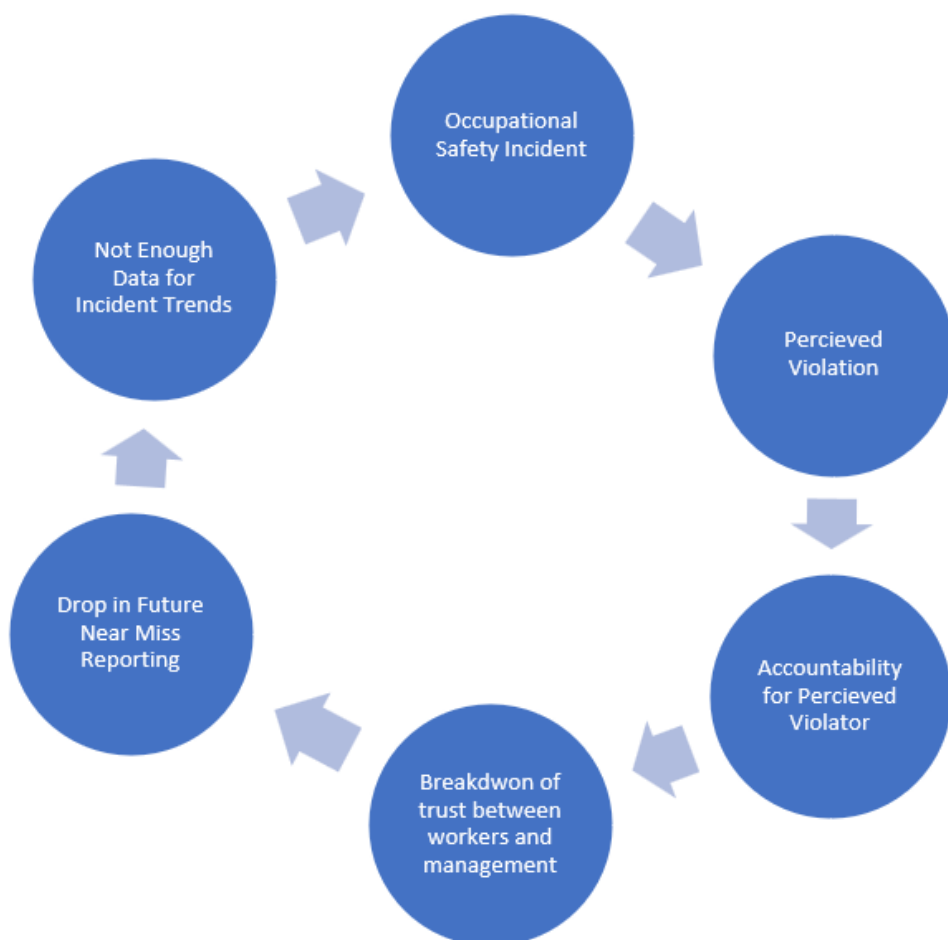


NEBULA
SAFETY & ENVIRONMENTAL

Introduction

Many industrial sites struggle with maintaining consistently strong occupational safety performance. Incidents may appear to be random and perhaps leadership believes that certain individuals are violating important safety rules. This can result in termination of employment for the perceived violators, which often results in a breakdown of trust between workers and management. This can then negatively impact future near miss reporting. With less high value near misses to review, incident trends remain hidden to safety professionals, and the cycle of poor performance continues, without interruption (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Common Cycle of Poor Occupational Safety Performance



In This Issue

This Safety Bulletin proposes best practices that can be applied to strengthen the Safety Culture and improve overall occupational safety performance. First, the cycle of poor performance is introduced. Next, Human Organizational Performance (HOP) is shared as an approach for breaking this cycle. Then, common worker perception biases are shared with regards to Occupational Safety and Process Safety Management (which was discussed in a previous Safety Bulletin-link), comparing and contrasting these biases. Finally, approaches are proposed for improving Occupational Safety performance, based on the common prevailing biases.

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In recent years, many companies have been embracing Human Organizational Performance (HOP) practices to break this cycle. A core HOP principle is that organizations shouldn't blame and punish workers, but rather strive to strengthen the organizational systems, which will then improve decision-making and Safety performance. This is because workers behave according to the Organizational Systems and Culture that they are working within (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Human Organizational Performance (HOP) Philosophy



Adopting HOP practices effectively breaks the cycle of poor performance by removing the violation! This is extremely important, as with time workers will be less likely to believe that they will be blamed for speaking up. Overall worker morale and near miss reporting should improve.

However, what happens if a new leader joins the company who is not yet aligned with this philosophy? Then, the company may go back to implementing blame and punishment. This can lead to a breakdown in trust between workers and leadership and ultimately sink the site Safety performance. This is one reason why HOP implementers also focus on setting up Learning Teams and other events to further embed HOP work practices which strengthen teamwork and Safety Culture.

The Spark

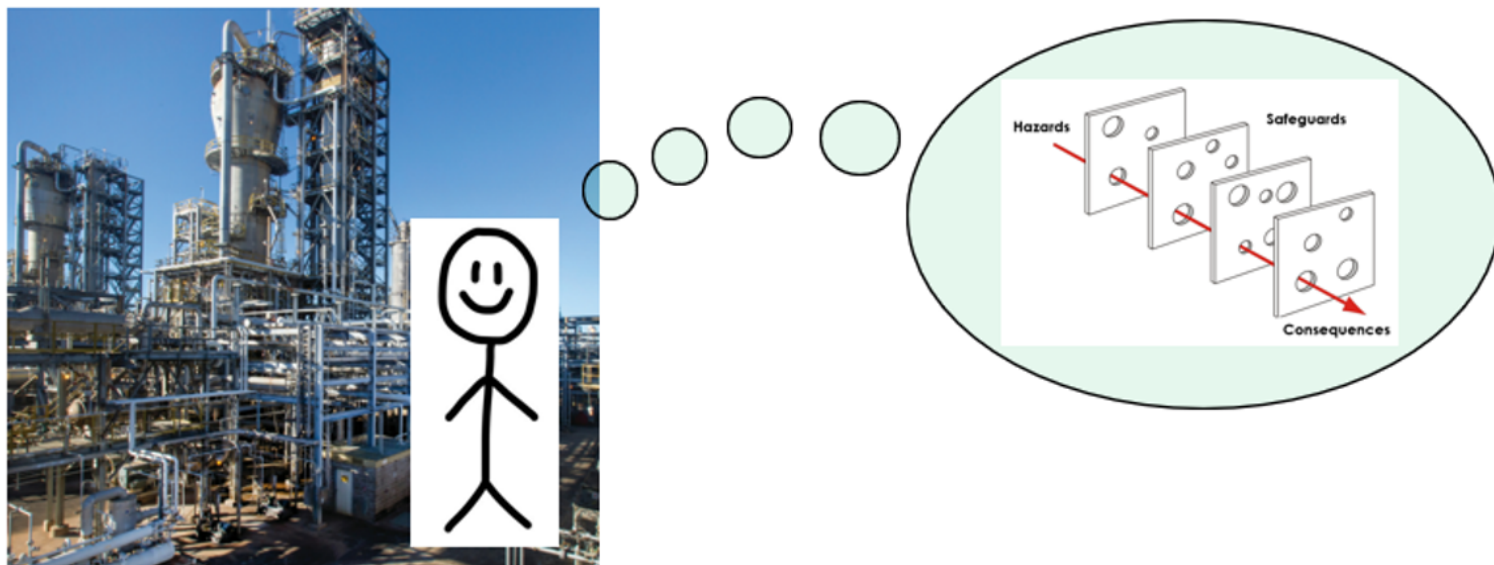
Implementing HOP practices is very beneficial. However, companies can do even more to strengthen the Safety Culture. Once that initial flame from applying HOP dies down, companies need to re-kindle the worker's desire to continuously learn and improve in Occupational Safety. Otherwise, the worker may revert to old ways. Sadly, many companies lack the ability to see this. Instead, they continuously share safety rules and statistics, which can make Safety seem mundane, taken for granted, and even impersonal. The worker may subconsciously think that they can just go-through-the-motions and will likely not get hurt today, tomorrow, or even later this week. This is a dangerous lack of sense of vulnerability.

Some companies have identified supervisor coaching as the antedote for this condition. Supervisor coaching, like HOP principles is very beneficial, but it is a more costly way of addressing the problem as it takes an extensive amount of time. Additionally, only a small part of the message provided to the supervisors will ever make it down to the frontline workers.

A much more cost-effective and direct approach is to re-ignite an interest in Safety for EVERYONE in the organization, simultaneously. After all, Safety is for EVERYONE, not just leadership. So, what is the spark that can re-kindle worker engagement? It's sharing high consequence incidents! Sharing high consequence incidents makes it clear to the worker that incidents do happen, and that the worker plays a critical role in identifying hazards and in controlling those hazards. It shows them that their job isn't easy, but skill is required to prevent catastrophic incidents. It also is something that everyone can be aligned with since all leaders want to prevent catastrophic incidents from occurring. It is not a Safety gimmick or program, but rather a best practice that aligns all workers with a common goal, to learn from the past to work as safely as possible in the future.

Ultimately, the end-goal is to have workers think about hazards, safeguards, and potential consequences with each task that is performed (Figure 3). Staying safe is something that should come naturally to the worker within the company's culture. If this is not the case, the Safety Culture must be strengthened.

Figure 3. Worker Continuously Thinking About Hazards and Controls



Implementation Help

Have you ever been to a boring Safety Meeting? If you answered “yes,” you are not alone. Many companies underutilize these meetings. Boring statistics or regulations are shared. Then, it’s over... finally!

Well, it doesn’t have to be that way. Instead, interesting high consequence occupational safety incidents can be shared at Safety Meetings to bring perspective and insight. These don’t have to be incidents that occurred internally to the company, external incidents can be shared as well. Regardless of the incident discussed, it is important to relay the following important information:

- *What was the context?*
- *Were there any warnings that an incident may be imminent? If so, what?*
- *What did the company learn from the incident? What improvements were made?*

After sharing the incident, it is beneficial to review the relevant work practices and controls to ensure a similar incident would be prevented or mitigated at the worksite. This emphasizes the importance of those safe work practices and encourages worker implementation.

The strategy should be different when sharing Occupational Safety incidents versus Process Safety Management incidents. This is because workers’ perception of hazards/ risks is typically different for Occupational Safety when compared to Process Safety Management. The table below provides common perception biases and a strategy for either breaking the common bias to improve performance or strengthening the common bias to improve sense of vulnerability and call to duty.

Table 1. Common Perception Biases - Process Safety Management and Occupational Safety

Topic	Occupational Safety	Strategy for Improving Performance	Process Safety Management	Strategy for Improving Performance
Likelihood of an event	"These events happen fairly frequently, but I don't think it will happen to me."	Biweekly or monthly sharing is sufficient.	"These events are rare and are very unlikely to happen."	Rapid sharing on a weekly basis.
Ability to recover from an event	"There may be no ability to recover, especially if a worker bleeds profusely, is electrocuted, or falls from heights."	Act-out the aftermath from the first responder point of view.	"We'll likely be able to recover if I notice an event starts to occur. We can get systems back into a safe posture."	Share incidents where there was a lack of ability to recover. Make sure the reasons recovery didn't occur are clear.
Emergency response	"I might see blood and guts if an event occurs. That's scary."	Share the incident consequences in as much detail as possible.	"I'll likely have to make a few phone calls if an event occurs."	Share incidents where emergency response didn't go well. Highlight gaps.

Workers' common perception biases are quite different in Occupational Safety versus Process Safety Management. This is why it is possible that a worksite may have very poor performance in Occupational Safety even though they have maintained exceptional performance in Process Safety Management, or vice versa. What this indicates is that their strategy for getting the message across to the worker is much stronger in one area versus the other. Or, perhaps, they have not communicated the message well in one area of the workplace, or possibly, not for long enough. It typically takes about 1 – 2 years of sharing before sustained performance improvement is achieved. However, if you invest in strengthening the culture and inspire others to improve, the performance will dramatically improve sooner. Think of it as an investment. You are investing in strengthening the Safety Culture today, which will help to prevent incidents tomorrow.