The Safety Professional's Road Map to
WORKPLACE TRUST & PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

By Sharleigh Zavaglia

Defining the role of safety professionals in promoting workplace trust and psychological safety is of paramount importance in fostering a robust safety culture within an organization.

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Bringing about workplace change can be a formidable undertaking, but with the right tools, integrating a culture of trust can be an uncomplicated process and will bolster an atmosphere that stimulates worker participation, and diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI).

Psychological Safety & Workplace Trust

Safety professionals strive to establish a healthy and secure workplace for employees, and they continually seek new ways to improve the safety of tasks and processes. Employees are provided with interactive safety training and resources catered to diverse learning styles and languages. Trust, however, is a crucial element that when absent results in a disconnect between leadership and employees.

To cultivate trust in the workplace and foster a culture of DEI, worker involvement must be embraced, and the psychological well-being of workers must be duly considered. Leaders must evaluate workers' aptitude, integrity and benevolence, which are all interconnected with creating an environment that allows workers to feel comfortable sharing their ideas on workplace safety, with the assurance that their suggestions will be incorporated for the improvement of the safety management system.

When workers experience a sense of psychological safety, they are more inclined to share their perspectives without fear of rebuke or disregard from their superiors. As Conklin (2019) points out, the higher the hierarchical level within the organization, the more distant one is from hazards present on the production floor. Given that leaders tend to spend less time on the production floor, while employees spend most of their workday on the front line, it is advantageous for leaders to gain insights from employees regarding the hazards they face and leverage those insights to make improvements based on employee suggestions. The transition from a closed workplace to an all-inclusive one poses a challenge, and leaders must prioritize the assessment of their competence, uprightness and benevolence within the work environment.

DEI and psychological safety go hand in hand since our duty as safety professionals is to create a safe workplace, not just physically and environmentally, but mentally as well. There is one factor common to every individual that if removed will destroy even the most thriving company, but if developed and leveraged has the potential to create unparalleled success and prosperity in every dimension of life: trust (Covey & Merrill, 2008).

When workers lack an open environment to voice their opinions and be heard, they can experience emotions associated with mistrust such as anxiety, oppression or fear. This can make the difference between a worker sharing with leadership a hazard they saw and the task or procedure then being addressed, versus that worker remaining quiet and the unspoken hazard, then leading to a workplace injury. The goal when promoting DEI is to nurture trust through worker participation and psychological safety. In turn, this will improve the company's safety management system as a whole.

Analyzing Leadership to Promote Trust & DEI

As safety professionals, we endeavor to advance DEI by observing the learning behaviors of individuals during safety meetings and by offering resources in diverse languages to ensure that everyone can comprehend the material. But have we examined ourselves as leaders? To establish trust and enhance DEI comprehensively, a leader must conduct a self-analysis of their own competency, integrity and munificence, all of which constitute the bedrock of a robust safety culture.

Diversity is more than simply providing reading materials in multiple languages. Workers are distinct and possess unique abilities. They also come from different backgrounds that can include experience in areas that may be beneficial to problem-solving. While leaders need to demonstrate ability in required areas, no team expects its leader to be great at everything (Lloyd, 2020). By utilizing employees' insights and recommendations, it is possible to identify opportunities for enhancement that would have been unattainable had managers not sought the assistance of their staff.

Providing an environment where workers have an equal opportunity to learn and participate is crucial to an open workplace. Equity extends beyond the mere provision of safety materials across diverse contexts, catering to various learning styles and levels of comprehension. Inherent in equity is integrity, which entails the capacity of leaders to espouse honesty, reliability and consistency among all employees. Do we adequately demonstrate to our workforce how we have incorporated their suggestions to enhance the safety management system? Is it possible for all staff members to trust that their opinions will be valued, and not merely those of a select few? An issue that often confronts leaders in this regard is that a few extroverted employees may tend to express themselves

more, thereby causing introverted individuals to feel excluded or neglected. Leaders may want to incorporate smaller group breakout sessions where there is a mix of outgoing and reserved individuals coming together to create a few ideas that can then be shared with the entire group at the end of the meeting. The integrity factor is reflected in how the leader's team perceives their honesty, uprightness, reliability and consistency (Lloyd, 2020). If a leader consistently endeavors to promote inclusivity, honesty and responsiveness to worker feedback, the subsequent level of equitable practice and the cultivation of trust between workers and leaders can be achieved.

Care is an essential element of trust in the workplace, particularly when leaders aim to promote inclusion. Demonstrating benevolence is imperative in this regard. One step toward achieving this goal is to invite workers' ideas and suggestions and integrate them into the strategy for enhancing workplace safety. However, failing to demonstrate care and neglecting to acknowledge workers' hard work or fully address their concerns can undermine trust and lead to mistrust among employees.

Active listening to employee concerns and ensuring that their hard work is noticed are tangible expressions of care (Lloyd, 2020). Are employees acknowledged for proposing new safety-enhancing ideas? Failure to acknowledge such efforts may result in employees experiencing a lack of motivation to continue making suggestions. They may also choose to remain silent in the face of potential hazards that could lead to serious injuries. Apart from recognition, the demonstration of active listening skills by management when employees express their concerns can foster a sense of inclusivity. This can help employees feel like valued team members rather than just numbers, thereby promoting a culture of inclusion, enhancing participation and building trust.

Ability, integrity, and benevolence are all keys to developing a culture of trust, worker participation and psychological safety. Now that the framework for promoting DEI has been described, there are some key steps that leaders and safety professionals can take to begin the process of closing the gap, dismantling old practices and becoming next-generation safety leaders.

Workplace Trust & DEI in Action

We examined the framework aimed at fostering trust in the workplace, which paves the way for a robust culture that encompasses DEI. To bridge the divide between employees and upper management, it is imperative to conduct a leadership analysis to identify areas that require improvement. However, safety professionals can implement several measures to initiate the integration of the new culture in the workplace. Three factors serve as a promising starting point for achieving success in promoting this transformation: active listening, openness and inclusivity, and open mindedness.

Promote Active Listening

When a worker feels comfortable enough to voice to leadership a potential safety hazard they see in the

workplace, they are trusting leadership to create a solution for their concern. It is crucial to practice listening and go above and beyond acknowledgment. When engaging in active listening, many factors require consideration, including tone of response, body language and level of engagement. As a leader, it is crucial to demonstrate care and empathy toward workers who rely on us for assistance in various situations and to genuinely comprehend their perspective. Following active listening, it is important to initiate a task analysis to identify potential hazards that employees may be concerned about and plan improvements accordingly. By taking these steps, employees are reassured that their opinions and concerns are valued and that they can have confidence in you as their leader, thus feeling secure and comfortable expressing themselves.

Encourage Openness and Inclusivity

As leaders in environment, health and safety, we must promote an open and inclusive culture. A highly effective approach to implementing the aforementioned framework is to devise systems and strategies that enable the team to share their views and concerns during safety meetings. It is recommended that employers avoid conducting routine safety meetings with a mere sign-off sheet, and opt instead to organize an interactive meeting. An excellent suggestion would be to initiate a discussion topic at the beginning of the week, such as ergonomics in the workplace. Additionally, the workers should create a checklist of the areas that require improvement and bring it to the meeting at the end of the week. An open discussion should then be held on how the improvements can be made, with contributions from the team. Furthermore, a game plan for system analysis and the end goal of resolving the issue should be created, taking into account the suggestions put forth by workers. This approach enables the team to recognize the efforts of each member and reward them accordingly, which in turn motivates them to effectively address safety issues.

Approach Problems With an Open Mind

When confronted with a predicament within a given system or task, it is advisable to conduct an analysis of the system. Instead of resorting to the approach of assigning blame to the worker and consequently dismissing them from their position or the organization during incident investigation, it is preferable to shift the focus toward an appraisal of the

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system and determine feasible measures that can be taken to eradicate the problem. The first step toward this end is to establish a plan for system analysis and, subsequently, procure feedback from the worker who sustained an injury and from other workers who have carried out the same task for their insights on the possible cause of the hazard. By utilizing the collective expertise of the team as problem-solvers and assimilating feedback to address the issue, an environment is fostered that promotes worker participation and breaks the cycle of terminating valuable employees due to systemic or task-related issues. Looking at issues with an open mind and working together with your team, rather than trying to eliminate an employee, will promote trust building and help the team recognize you as a true leader. Your team sees that you are humble enough to accept that the issue is within the system or task and to seek help from the team to solve the problem holistically, resulting in a stronger safety culture.

Conclusion

Establishing trust in the workplace and fostering psychological safety can yield many benefits for organizations. These include a safer and healthier workplace overall, as well as greater worker participation and increased DEI. To achieve this, a process-based solution is necessary. Specifically, it is crucial to cultivate a culture that prioritizes trust between employees and leadership and that places a strong emphasis on worker participation through DEI. When implementing organizational trust, companies should carefully analyze leadership qualities such as ability, integrity and care. By creating a culture of trust, companies can improve safety holistically by encouraging employees to voice their concerns about hazards, promoting worker participation in problem-solving, and improving tasks and systems to support a strong safety culture that effectively reduces workplace incidents, injuries and illnesses. **PSJ**

References

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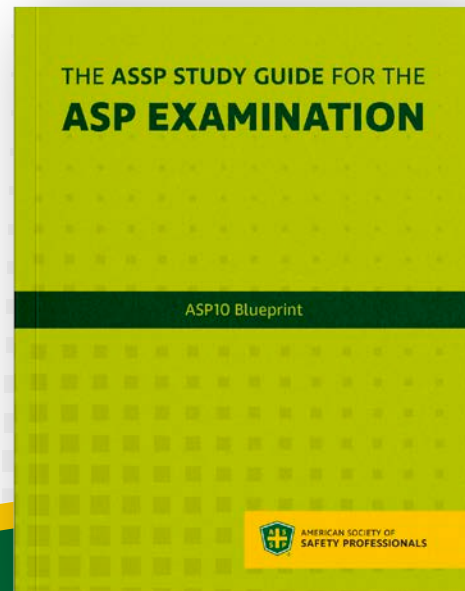Lloyd, C. (2020). *Next generation safety leadership: From compliance to care.* CRC Press. https://doi.org/10.1201/9781003051978