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Safety Leaders: How to Walk the Talk

By Jeff Spatz, Senior Safety Consultant, The Graham Company

Safety Leaders play a critical role in an organization's safety culture. Effective leaders "walk the talk," influencing others through their own behaviors. No one knows this better than Don Swasing, Director of Site Work Services at Schlouch Inc., one of Eastern Pennsylvania's leading residential and commercial site preparation specialists. Over the course of Schlouch's 14-year safety partnership with The Graham Company, Swasing has transformed his workforce from a team who views safety as "just another handbook to read" to a team that is so safety-minded that it has become an authentic OSHA partner and also a safety instructor for the National Utility Contractor Association's (NUCA) Train-the-Trainer program.

ELIMINATE FEAR, EDUCATE & EMPOWER

Swasing admits that "walking the talk" requires a deep commitment, not just from senior leaders like him, but from every level, and he says the first step to building an organization of Safety Leaders is to "eliminate the fear." But simultaneously, Swasing says, "It was essential that we also educate all staff to educate and empower everyone."

"Having Jeff Spatz and Mark Troxell from The Graham Company at our sites to conduct safety audits was eye-opening for me, but initially instilled some fear across the organization, so I had to work hard to make the audit process viewed as an invaluable resource, not a threat," said Swasing. "Once everyone let go of their 'I could lose my job' thoughts, there was a real paradigm shift that allowed Graham to recognize our knowledge gaps and then backfill with high-quality education."

ENABLE POSITIVE INFLUENCE

In analyzing the efforts of Swasing and The Graham Company's safety team, here are six management techniques that will increase positive influence from your Safety Leaders:

1. **Coaching:** Supervisors need to develop a non-threatening coaching method that reinforces rules and processes. At Schlouch, there is a mandatory Safety Huddle every morning at every site to discuss the general hazards – this is a key component of educating and empowering employees about safety. "Sometimes the site coordinator leads the huddle and sometimes it's a new laborer – we pass the responsibility around, that makes it fun but also helps cultivate Safety Leaders from the ground up," said Swasing.
2. **Problem Solving:** Seek the input of other people. Solicit feedback from co-workers, survey the feedback and brainstorm for solutions.
3. **Measuring:** Apply a proactive approach to measurement. Lagging indicators such as injury rates or the number of previous OSHA citations are considered reactive. Try measuring leading indicators such as compliant safety observations, completion of self-inspection reports, completion of pre-task plans, etc.
4. **Relating:** A successful leader is able to form bonds with fellow employees by discussing similar situations they have worked through and give advice based on experience.
5. **Enforcing:** At Schlouch, Swasing finds that enforcing rules is made much easier because everyone operates under the umbrella of accountability. "We are a close-knit group, so the disciplinary action is always coming from the heart; but there simply can be no flexibility; rather it's all about accountability," stated Swasing. Try these techniques when handing out discipline:
 - Give positive with negative – the general rule of thumb is to give four positive comments for every one negative comment.
 - Explain the exact consequences of non-compliance.
 - Specify the desired behavior or method to assure future compliance.
 - If necessary, schedule safety training for the desired behavior.
 - Allow the employee to discuss barriers to compliance.
 - End by assuring the employee's future success in compliance.

About the Author:

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Since 1990, Jeff has dealt extensively with all aspects of Loss Control in construction including Project Safety, Claims Investigation, Regulatory Compliance and Exposure Analysis. Jeff is authorized to instruct the 10 and 30-Hour OSHA Construction Outreach Programs and is a charter member of the Mid-Atlantic Construction Safety Council. Jeff received his Bachelor of Science in Business Administration Degree from Kutztown University.

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