SEED FOR SAFETY

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SAFETY CULTURE

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Safety Culture

All organizations incorporate a set of cultures which have developed over a period of time. They are associated with the accepted standards of behaviour within that organization and the development of a specific culture with regard to, for instance, quality, customer service and written communication is a continuing quest for many organizations.

Establishing a safety culture

With the greater emphasis on health and safety management, attention should be paid by managers to the establishment and development of the correct safety culture within the organization.

The main principles, which involve the establishment of a safety culture, accepted and observed generally, are:

- The acceptance of responsibility at and from the top, exercised through a clear chain of command, seen to be actual and felt through the organization;
- A conviction that high standards are achievable through proper management;

- Setting and monitoring of relevant objectives/targets, based upon satisfactory internal information systems;
- Systematic identification and assessment of hazards and the devising and exercise of preventive systems which are subject to audit and review; in such approaches, particular attention is given to the investigation of error;
- Immediate rectification of deficiencies; and

- Promotion and reward of enthusiasm and good results.

Developing a safety culture

Several features can be identified from the study which are essential to a sound safety culture. A company wishing to improve its performance will need to judge its existing practices against them.

- Leadership and commitment from the top which is genuine and visible. This is the most important feature.
- Acceptance that it is a long-term strategy which requires sustained effort and interest.
- A policy statement of high expectations, conveying a sense of optimism about what is possible supported by adequate codes of practice and safety standards.

- Health and safety should be treated as other corporate aims, and properly resourced.
- It must be a line management responsibility
- ‘Ownership’ of health and safety must permeate at all levels of the workforce. This requires employee involvement, training and communication.
- Realistic and achievable targets should be set and performance measured against them.
- Incidents should be thoroughly investigated.
- Consistency of behaviour against agreed standards should be achieved by auditing and good safety behaviour should be a condition of employment.
- Deficiencies revealed by an investigation or audit should be remedied promptly.
- Management must receive adequate and up-to-date information to be able to assess performance.

The role of management

Legal requirements have moved away from the setting of prescriptive standards for health and safety to a more management and human factors orientated approach. On this basis, the role of senior management in developing and sustaining an appropriate safety culture has become increasingly significant. What must managers do then to encourage a positive safety culture?

Firstly, the Board must clearly state their intentions, expectations and beliefs in relation to health and safety at work. In other words, they must state where they want the organization to be in terms of health and safety, and formulate action plans for achieving these objectives.

Adequate resources, in terms of financial resources, time and effort must be made available in order to translate these plans and objectives into effective action. In particular, managers at all levels must be made accountable and responsible for their performance, as with other areas of performance, as part of this process. This should take place through routine performance monitoring and review, such performance being related to the reward structure of the organization. On the job performance monitoring should take into account the human decision-making components of a job, in particular the potential for human error.

Above all, senior managers and directors must be seen by all concerned to be taking an active and continuing interest in the development and implementation of health and safety improvements. On this basis, they should reward positive achievement in order to reinforce their message to subordinates that health and safety is of prime importance in the activities of the organization.

In the same way, the various lower levels of management must be actively involved. They must accept their responsibilities for maintaining health and safety standards as line managers and ensure that health and safety keeps a high profile within their area of responsibility. This will entail vigilance on their part to ensure, for instance, that safe systems of work are being followed, that people under their control are wearing the appropriate personal protective equipment and that unsafe practices by workers are being adopted. They must show that deviations from recognized health and safety standards will not be tolerated but, in doing so, it is important for line managers to recognize that they will receive backing from senior managers where such deviations actually occur. It is vitally important that senior management demonstrate their commitment.

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