

The 9 Key Elements of Safety Excellence

by Ronald J. Schenk, CUSP

Safety as a Corporate Strategy

Safety, in the Electric Utility Industry, has come a long way in the past couple of decades. We've always wanted our folks to not get hurt doing their job, but it's only been recently that the industry has recognized a broader responsibility for safety in the workplace and has begun to do something about it.

In a canvass of electric utility CEOs, six top reasons were given as to why they felt that safety was good business and why safety has become part of a strategy for success. (See Exhibit 1) Several things may be gleaned from this ranking.

The number one reason for supporting safety in the workplace was the correct one: employee health and moral obligation. The Board Room has finally left behind the rationale that 'when someone gets hurt, it's their own d@\$% fault – they should be more careful.' When someone gets hurt on the job, many people have failed, including those in the Board Room.

The second reason listed is an interesting one, too: 'because we have to.' Management is accepting they have no choice in whether they provide a safe workplace, or not. They must.

The remaining responses were expected, but the fact that 'Public Expectations' made the list at all, is telling. It is less and less acceptable for workers to get hurt on the job today. The Public are less inclined to overlook accidents and more inclined to see them as a failure of management.

Truly, we are heading in the right direction, however as most of you know, 'Zero Injuries' is still an allusive goal for most of us. Within our Consulting Practice at ISPC, we've compiled a list of 9 key elements that appear to be part of every successful safety program (see Exhibit 2).

Exhibit 1

Top Reasons for Safety given by CEOs of Electric Utilities

- Employee Health/Moral Obligation
- Legal/Compliance Requirements
- Cost Effectiveness
- Worker Productivity
- Employer of Choice
- Customer/Public Expectations

Exhibit 2

The 9 Elements of Safety Excellence

- 1) Management Commitment & Leadership
- 2) Roles, Responsibilities and Accountabilities
- 3) Employee Participation
- 4) Communications
- 5) Behavioral Skills
- 6) Hazard Recognition & Control
- 7) Education & Training
- 8) Incident Investigation & Analysis
- 9) Performance Evaluation & Measurements

Key Element # 1: Management Commitment & Leadership

Leadership in safety for all management and supervisory levels in the organization is paramount to a successful safety program. Managers and supervisors influence the attitudes of everyone else in the company. If they are not 'bought-in' to safety as a value for themselves, no one else will be either. This can't be faked. Company leaders either believe that staying safe is the most important thing we do, or they don't believe it. Workers will see right through any insincere attitude about safety. We can't 'talk' one way and 'walk' another.

Key Element #2: Roles, Responsibilities & Accountabilities

Safety is part of everyone's job description – both figuratively and literally. Staying safe is an expectation and should be a condition of employment.

So, we all have a role in safety and a responsibility for our own safety and the safety of others around us. When safety is accepted as a personal responsibility everything becomes so much easier. With responsibility comes accountability. But accountability for what?

Behaviors. Safety is not a thing; it's how we behave. And, as Safety Professionals, we at ISPC call these behaviors 'leading indicators' or 'process' behaviors. In other words, there are some things or processes that must be done consistently by workers to avoid incidents. A short list might include things like safety training, hazard analysis and mitigation, pre-job briefings and compliance with PPE usage. The more these behaviors are used and used correctly, the fewer incidents we have. There is a direct correlation: do them and stay safe, don't do them and, when your luck runs out, get hurt.

Accountability means being held responsible for the correct behaviors. Every time.

Key Element #3: Employee Participation

Managers and supervisors can influence attitudes about safety, but they can't do the work for the workers. The workers will work safe or they won't. That's why the 'what they do' to stay safe must come from them, as much as possible. When the workers participate in developing those processes mentioned above, they are so much more likely to do them. Since they have decided these things are important to do, they now do them for themselves, not because a manager said they have to. That's where we want to get to with safe work practices.

Get your workers involved in the solutions. You might be surprised at some of the ideas they come up with to work safer.



Get the workers involved in the solutions

Key Element #4: Communications

It has become trite to talk about the importance of effective communications in the workplace. By now, we all know that. But ‘what’ we should communicate consistently may not be well known.

Often, we fail to communicate company values enough. Corporations spell out their Mission Statements, their Goals and Objectives and their Corporate Values. They print them and post them around company facilities, put them on the website and point to them proudly, in the press.

Don’t stop there. Our people need to be reminded of all this, too. Regularly. Our Values help establish the culture in the company, how we think and how we treat each other and the customer. In the day-to-day work world, we often forget to talk about these values, but keeping them ‘front-of-mind’ will help everyone stay focused on what is important, including the worker out in the field that doesn’t see an office very often.

Key Element #5: At Risk Behaviors

Working safely is all about understanding ‘at risk behaviors.’ Identifying and qualifying risk on the jobsite means the workers spend time upfront reviewing and planning. OSHA calls this the Pre-Job Briefing and this is another area where structured, targeted communications for safety is essential. The important part of that planning process says that we will all agree on what hazards we are finding, how we are going to eliminate or control them and what work practices we are going to use to complete this work correctly, but safely. For example, part of the plan may discuss work positioning and the requirements under OSHA’s minimum approach distance (MAD) rules. When performing work on or near energized lines and equipment (or systems that could become energized), complying with MAD rules is important. Many injuries and even fatalities have occurred because of accidental contact with energized lines and equipment – work positioning. Just one of the ‘at risk behaviors’ we must monitor and control. There are many others.

Key Element #6: Hazard Recognition and Control

Following up on the introduction of the Pre-Job Briefing above, identifying and mitigating hazards on the job is a critically important element in any safety program. OSHA’s 1910.269 (c) requires us to do this on every jobsite, but it is an industry ‘best practice’ in any case. Recognizing hazards is a pro-active measure to confront them before they can harm us. This is best done together, as a group of workers, when possible. More eyes can see more things and some of us are better at seeing these hazards, than others. Once identified, a range of mitigating practices is available to control that hazard: engineering controls, administrative controls and finally personal protective equipment (PPE). Why is PPE last? Personal protective equipment is considered by OSHA to be our *last* line of defense, not our first. Frankly, we must use them all, when we can. Multiple layers of safety help keep us safe when one of the layers fails.

Key Element #7: Education and Training

Every successful safety program is active in educating and training workers. Not just in technical skills and correct work practices, but in a wide range of knowledge that can be applied to their daily safety practices. This

is on-going, as well. We're all human beings and can become complacent over time. For Safety Professionals this is called 'Normalization of Deviation'. Big words that just remind us that our people work in high risk situations, every day. Over time, it's normal for people to get used to that high risk and become complacent – they no longer perceive the high risk. When this happens, they let down their 'guard'. Reoccurring safety training helps keep safety 'front-of-mind' for workers, where it must be, to fight off complacency, and to stay current with best practices in the industry.

Key Element #8: Incident Investigation and Analysis

When things happen that shouldn't happen and an incident occurs, we need to understand what happened, clearly, why it happened and what needs to change to keep it from happening again. That requires some level of investigation and analysis of the incident. The word 'incident' is broad for Safety Professionals. A 'near miss' or 'near hit' or whatever you call it, is an incident, too. The most successful safety programs use these opportunities to correct failures in the system that allowed this incident to occur. It's preventive. The goal is to prevent incidents. Investigating what happened and why it happened can help us correct things, so it doesn't happen again.

Key Element #9: Program Evaluation and Measurement

Effective safety programs never quite 'arrive'. They are always evolving and improving, driven by an attitude of 'we can do even better.' This means we evaluate the effectiveness of what we are doing in safety, routinely. The measurements we take and the feedback we get help us tweak the processes for better results, next time. Measure what, you ask? We have two types: leading indicators of safety performance and lagging indicators of safety performance. Leading indicator measurements include things like: are we orienting our new people well, how's our training, numbers of safety meetings, are the pre-job briefings being conducted and documented, how about PPE compliance – all the things we know that when done, and done well, prevent incidents. Lagging indicator measurements are things like how many and what type of incidents are we having, how much are they costing, what kind of OSHA violations are we receiving, what fines and penalties are we receiving – all the things we look at *after* an incident occurs. Both leading and lagging indicators need to be measured and reviewed, but it's the leading indicators we want to get good at. The better we are at preventing incidents the fewer incidents we'll have that generate those lagging indicator statistics.



Evaluation and measurement

Conclusion

Electric utilities have come a long way in worker safety. However, we have more work to do. One recent year, 17 workers lost their lives at electric utilities in the United States. Powerline contractors added 25 more workers to that fatality statistic. There were many more injuries, as well.

That said, we are making progress in our safety programs and their effectiveness. The 9 Key Elements of Safety Excellence, discussed in this article can help you make further progress, if you will seriously consider implementing and using them. I know that the families of the 42 workers mentioned above would encourage us to work harder, too.

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