

‘REF’ Your IFLs **Recognize, Engage & Foster Your Informal Safety Leaders**

Over the last year one would be hard pressed to pick up a safety magazine and not see an article on leadership. These articles have spanned from the top (CEO) to the bottom (First Line Supervisor) of the organizational flow chart. Yet, as informative as these articles have been, we are still failing to engage a fundamental group of strong leaders within our organizations.

Leadership has nothing to do with rank or title. Leadership is when someone follows another, because they want to. A recent survey of a company with 2,500 employees asked employees to identify leaders within their organization. Only 15% of the identified leaders had a title of manager. Right now, our organizations have people leading others and these leaders carry no official status or title. These are often ‘rank and file’ line employees but do not let that fool you, leadership has no title. These are individuals that have great influence over the actions and attitudes of their co-workers because of who they are, leaders.

If we can identify, recognize, engage and foster this ‘already existing’ core group of leaders on a clear vision of safety success then we will be one large step closer to our safety goals.

Leaders, not managers, are leading your organization...

Former General Electric CEO Jack Welch made this observation in his book entitled *Straight From the Gut*. As CEO he was technically each person’s boss. But most of GE’s employees would never see him. “GE to them was their manager,” Welch stated. He needed that manager to be walking in step with his goals and visions. But, as noted in the survey above, only about 1 in 6 managers are the recognized leaders within an organization. Subsequently, how effectively do managers establish the goals and visions of their CEO when they are managing and not leading?

When safety goals and visions are at stake, we have an option; we can engage our informal safety leaders (ISLs). Once informed of the vision and engaged on task, these leaders can achieve real change that is much harder to do from a management seat. Informal safety leaders can help improve the overall number of safe behaviors (versus at-risk behaviors), provide a means to communicate safety values and initiatives to peers, (sharing their ideas about safety with senior management), spring board their safety ideas into action when appropriate and use their already established role as leader to change the safety culture.

You’ll know it when you see it...

The first step in the ISL process is to identify your leaders. In reality we don’t really need to define a leader, in leadership ‘we know it when we see it.’ Yet, just to get one thinking about recognizable leadership traits, consider a leader to have one or more of the following; an individual who takes ownership, an individual who takes great pride in his/her work, the most skilled in his/her respective trade, one who is a subject matter

expert, one others listen to, one that has networks throughout the organization, one who has passion for his/her job, safety, life etc, an individual who has a positive attitude, an individual who is a leader in the community and/or an individual that has already assumed some leadership roles such as safety committee chairman or union steward. Using these criteria as a general guide, begin identifying your current ISLs.

To change a safety culture, it's the people first...

Good To Great is Jim Collins' book outlining eleven companies that were able to sustain remarkable growth over a forty-year period. In that book, Collins noted that these companies that were able to achieve and sustain remarkable success because they realized that real change came from 'the people first with strategy, training and knowledge second.' We need to tag our ISLs, earn their buy-in of our safety vision and then tear down the walls and barriers so they can lead in their respective circle of influence. This will foster the safety change and culture that is needed for success.

After the ISLs are identified, it's time to 'REF' them (Recognize, Engage, Foster).

Recognize. Many ISLs will not realize that they are leaders nor will they understand the influence they have on others by their simple actions (safe or at-risk) and words (support of the safety process). Recognizing these individuals will make them aware that they are truly leaders and have great capacity to champion (or damage) safety within their circle of influence.

Recognition can be formal, such as during a presentation, large safety meeting or company function. Or it can be personal, one on one, which is the approach I prefer. For example, after working to identify the ISLs within my organization, I recognized each with a personal hand written note and a very nice gift. The feedback was outstanding.

Engagement. After the ISLs are identified and recognized, it's time to engage them. Bring all of your ISL together in one meeting led by your company's CEO or senior Vice President. The purpose of this meeting is to clearly communicate the company's safety mission, vision, goals, strategy and expectations straight to those that are leading in safety. Learn the "Safety Pulse" (what is really going on in the field in terms of safety) from the ISLs. This gives the CEO valuable real time insight into the true safety culture of his/her organization. Communicate to the CEO the roadblocks that prevent the safety goals from being achieved. Assign specific safety projects or activities to the ISLs if warranted. Train the ISLs to take a more active role in safety leadership. Finally, encourage the ISLs to continue leading co-workers in a positive manner.

Foster. Picture a wooden wagon wheel. The wheel's center or hub represents an organization's leader or leaders. The outer rim, connected to the hub by spokes, represents an organization's employees. The failure of many wonderful companies is that in the hub there is only one leader, only one person driving an initiative (such as safety). Once that individual retires or takes a new job, your hub is gone. The wheel can't function without that hub (leader) so it collapses.

To achieve success, including safety success, it is imperative for an organization to foster leaders. If not, it is the ‘captain and 1,000 foot soldiers’ syndrome. Once the Captain moves on, the wheel collapses. A successful long-term safety program fosters their ISLs, moving them from the rim to the hub. This will build and establish a leadership team; a center that will ensure the safety wheel continues to turn.

Fostering the ISLs can mean meeting periodically, quarterly for example, to continue to build the relationship with the ISLs and expand on their leadership capacity. Fostering can also mean that after initially identifying a small group of ISLs, you and the ISLs recruit and foster new leaders. What starts as only a very small percent of your group (one percent for example) grows to five or ten percent...and the wheel keeps turning.

The only safe ship in a storm is leadership...

Picture a ship in the water. There is a water line on the side of it, some of the ship is below the water line and some is above. In taking an unusual risk, some ask, “if I try this and fail, will it put a hole above the water line or below it?” If the initiative fails yet failure means a puncture in the ship above the water line then it was a risk worth taking because the ship will sail on. If it puts a hole below the water line, then the idea is not to be tried. Failure means the ship will sink.

‘REF’ your ISLs. First of all it will not fail because you will be dealing with your company’s leaders...your best people. But even if you set sail and it doesn’t go the way you think it should, it’s a hole above the water line; it’s a true win/win. Build your leadership hub today...the only safe ship in a storm, is leadership.

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