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Aubrey Daniels, Ph.D., is a thought leader and internationally recognized expert on management, leadership, safety and workplace issues. As founder and chair of Aubrey Daniels International, he and his staff help organizations employ behavioral science principles to reenergize the workplace, optimize performance and achieve lasting results.

PS: Why is a strong safety culture important on a job site?

Aubrey: Culture can be boiled down to the way you treat each other. When people are treated positively, people are more willing to go out of their way to do things the right way. It does not take much to walk on site and determine immediately whether you have a positive culture.

By positive culture, I do not mean going around and patting people on the back, saying good things about what is going on. You can pat people on the back at the wrong time and you get the wrong thing. That is a superficial approach. The culture is just about the way people treat each other. Many safety cultures are negative because they have numerous penalties for doing something unsafe and having an incident. When that happens, you are not going to get people to do their best. Unfortunately, they will hide things and not report near misses. They will have a negative culture. It is important to develop a positive culture, and there are specific ways to go about that. You must understand the effects of positive reinforcement and how that applies to daily activities.

PS: How can leaders show their commitment to safety?

Aubrey: The key is *show*. You can't talk people into safety. It is about the actions rather than the words. Leaders can also avoid blaming people. Few people would deliberately do something unsafe. If leaders can accept that, they will realize that there are environmental factors that cause workers to do something unsafe. If this is so, then it does not make sense to blame the worker, but to look at the environment and see what changes can be made to lead people to be safe. That requires some doing and some undoing of bad habits over time because many people just want to blame somebody. It is that kind of accusatory action on the part of the leaders that causes people to not report incidents.

PS: How can leaders encourage others to be safety champions?

Aubrey: Looking at safety processes and practices that make safety the easy thing to do, you need to eliminate blame, reinforce behaviors and focus on fixes. In other words, "We did what we did, now what can we learn from that?" That way, employees become involved in solutions. That is another thing many organizations do rather poorly—solicit ideas from frontline employees and use those ideas to create a culture where people are positively reinforced for improvement. When we can show improvement in safety behaviors, people get involved. We get them to the point where they are more engaged in the process when positive consequences are used.

We talk about discretionary effort all the time. We can only get discretionary effort with positive consequences. So, when you begin to look at your processes and procedures and positively reinforce people for participating in that type of analysis, what changes need to be made and so on, they become safety champions. They are going to see things, report things and talk about their own behavior. We get an opportunity for everyone to learn.

PS: What leadership qualities are lacking in companies with poor safety performance?

Aubrey: They tend to punish—it is a reactive culture, rather than a proactive culture. The leadership does not have anything to do except give safety talks until something happens. When something happens, they spring into action, and they try to understand what happened. We try to teach managers, executives and others that the things they do every day create a positive leadership culture and that it is their responsibility. Leaders have roles to play in a safety culture just like the frontline employees.

PS: What message should SH&E professionals share with corporate leaders?

Aubrey: Again, it is not so much about what people say in the message as the actions. We just had a client that won safety awards, but when we examined the frontline level, we found that employees were afraid and intimidated to report incdents because they had won these awards. You do not have to be mean to have a negative safety culture. All you need to have is a safety culture that does not deliberately use positive reinforcement to promote safety habits. Some people think positive reinforcement is a tool, but it is a fact of life. If you can use that to promote desired behaviors, people will not only do what they are told, but also do things that need to be done. This cannot be done without positive reinforcement. It takes consequences to change behavior, and it takes a logical supervisor/manager to do that.

In the end, we want employees to do that for each other. We want everyone to be responsible for everyone else's safety. Of course they are, but in many places, workers do not speak up because of the negative consequences that they get.

In airline safety years ago, it was documented that the second officer in the cockpit would know that the captain was doing something wrong but would not speak to him about it because of the consequences that typically occurred when somebody did. When you have that kind of environment, you can't talk your way out of it. You have to do things that show what your commitment to safety is—taking action, providing budgets and making changes in processes and procedures. Leadership shows this involvement in safety.