# Ask the Expert: How Can I Build a High-Performance Safety Culture?

*Editor's note: Are you having an issue or challenge as a supervisor that you would like us to put to a safety professional on your behalf? Send your questions to Dave Duncan, editor of Safe Supervisor at daved@bongarde.com. He will direct your questions to one of our safety experts and publish the responses in this column.*

## QUESTION:

I know that supervisors who have good relationships with their crews tend to have safer and better-performing workers. So just how do I go about building productive relationships with my workers?

## ANSWER:

Good relationships tend to be associated with all kinds of good performance. Relationships and trust are essential for creating a safety culture. It is no coincidence that supervisors who have a good relationship with their crews tend to have safer crews.

Many people think of safety as a compliance issue—getting people to comply with safety rules, regulations, and procedures. However, if you want to go beyond compliance and create a high-performance safety culture, discretionary effort is a requirement. Discretionary effort is that effort that employees can give at work, but don't have to, and it rarely occurs in the context of poor employee-management relationships. Discretionary effort is created only through the use of positive reinforcement.

Research shows that when people are recognized for what they do well around safety and when reporting problems and concerns is met with reinforcing consequences (such as joint problem-solving and problem resolution), employees will be more engaged in safety. Alternatively, positive reinforcement is disabled by poor relationships. Not only are people less willing to use positive reinforcement within the context of a poor relationship, but when they do, that reinforcement is less effective. If you tell someone they've done a good job and/or try to show concern for their safety, but they dislike you and therefore don't care what you think, your attempts at reinforcement are less likely to be effective.

Because most safety management systems are not set up to encourage enough positive reinforcement, many well-intended leaders end up having poor relationships with their direct reports. It is also important to acknowledge that safety has historically been managed largely through negative reinforcement. People are told what the safety procedures, rules and expectations are, then if they violate any of the procedures, rules or expectations, they experience negative consequences varying from negative feedback to discipline. More importantly, when they follow the procedures, rules and expectations—that is, when they do things right—they rarely experience positive consequences.

A lack of trust is another contributor to poor relationships. Many things go into trust but, behaviorally speaking, trust comes down to *doing what you say you will do*. So how might otherwise trustworthy leaders create a lack of trust with their direct reports around safety? One way is when leaders, especially frontline supervisors, receive requests from frontline employees on hazard mitigation, for instance, that they don't keep track of or follow through on. Over time, the supervisor's trust is undermined. When employees report hazards or other barriers to safety, it is essential that leaders follow through. That follow-through cannot always be immediate remediation of the hazard, of course, but some kind of follow-through is essential. Letting people know what the plan is for remediation, giving them an estimated date of completion or simply being very clear the hazard cannot be remediated are all acceptable forms of follow up.

Having a good relationship doesn't mean being nice all the time or being soft on safety. Good relationships at work include accountability and constructive feedback. So how does a boss develop a good relationship with direct reports? Listed below are a few examples of behaviors that consistently contribute to positive workplace relationships. These behaviors can be exhibited by any "personality type" and can lead to improvements in safety and work in general.

1. **Set clear expectations.** Use pinpointed (actionable words) to ensure clarity of expectations; avoid assumptions and ask recipient(s) to state an understanding of the expectations.

2. **Listen.** Use active listening skills such as maintaining eye contact, using appropriate facial expressions, paraphrasing and asking questions to demonstrate understanding.

3. **Ask questions to understand problems/issues.** Avoid jumping to conclusions. There always is more to every story. Ask questions to uncover the details.

4. **Avoid blame.** People's behavior makes sense to them, even if it doesn't make sense to you. Find out what antecedents and consequences were in place that led to undesired behavior.

5. **Provide feedback that helps direct reports improve.** Pinpointed, timely feedback is most helpful. Don't save feedback for annual appraisals or even monthly one-on-one meetings; just-in-time feedback is the most effective.

Organizations that understand the value of good relationships do hold their managers and supervisors accountable for the behaviors associated with good relationships, and they reap the benefits in safety and beyond. When employees are listened to, recognized for the good things they do and treated like valued members of the team, they will give their discretionary effort toward making your organization more successful and safe.

*Question answered by Judy Agnew, Ph.D., Senior Vice President, Aubrey Daniels International. (http://aubreydaniels.com)*