

Promoting a Positive Safety Culture

Alex Julius

Introduction

Tree workers are not entirely to blame for their unsafe work behavior. Looking beyond enforcement of the Z133, management can address safety within its own company by working to improve management's safety program. When employers support safe behavior as well as good productivity, workers receive positive reinforcement for their safe work practices. Monitoring of the safety culture within a company can help when assessing a company's and its employees' commitment to safety.

Safety Culture vs. Safety Climate

The topic of safety culture extends beyond the production sector of tree care, and is a vital aspect in every work place, indoors or out. Though often disputed, safety culture is defined as the shared group values or accepted social norms among workers, and is often difficult to change. Comparatively, safety climate is defined as a snapshot in time of a company, which is often situational and rather temporary. First referenced in the Chernobyl Report in 1986, safety culture was defined as the human element or error that caused the incident. The report attributed lack of training, auditing, and safety awareness to the atrocity.

Fernández-Muñiz, et al. (2007) suggest that commitment to safety from management can affect both the attitudes and behaviors of their workers. In forming a positive safety culture model, the authors determine that two other contributing factors are employees' involvement and a safety management system. This system includes a safety policy, incentives for safe behavior, training for employees, communication within the hierarchy, planning (for both prevention and in the case of emergency), and feedback on events and conditions. Connections between these statements and the tree industry are quite evident when considering the clearly defined hierarchy apparent in most tree care companies, as well as the potential disconnection between managers and workers. Paramount in this article is the idea of employees' involvement in a safety management system.

When management is alienated from the actual tree care operations, it often creates unrealistic quotas that force workers to choose between safety and production. By keeping workers involved in safety management, managers can assure that a connection remains between what occurs in the office and what occurs in the field. Further, planning and practicing safety procedures are of utmost importance when considering the immediacy of action required when tree care incidents occur. Defined emergency procedures and proper training of new employees in these procedures will help expedite the process when quick actions are required.

Observational Safety Behavior

Other studies have looked at how observing others' safety behavior, in effect, changed their own behavior. Alvero, et al. (2008) studied the effect behavioral observations have on observers' own behavior. Subjects were given a simple task to assess productivity. These subjects also watched a video of people performing the same task and completed checklists to assess their sitting positions based on predetermined criteria for ergonomic posture. After this evaluation period, subjects were later observed for their own posture while performing the task. This study found that after the subjects had watched the video, they worked more safely and consistently through all subsequent sessions.

Olson, et al. (2009) looked at the use of personal protective equipment, focusing on collective norms and its effect on imitation. Subjects were placed in a room with white noise played slightly below the hearing protection standard (85 dBA) and were provided with hearing protection. They were shown an instructional video on how to carry out a certain task, but each video varied in one of four ways, altering the frequency of actors' use of hearing protection. When later given the demonstrated task to complete, subjects were observed for the use of hearing protection. The findings suggest that proper modeling of PPE use increases collective imitation.

Safety-Mindedness in Other Industries

Similar to the tree care industry, many nonfatal injuries sustained by construction workers are caused by contact with an object, falls, and exertion injuries. In an attempt to make construction safety more proactive than reactive, Kines, et al. (2010) conducted an observational study that used intervention groups altered by verbal safety culture. Construction foremen were coached on verbal exchanges with their employees, altering the frequency of safety-oriented conversations. Both foremen and employees were interviewed throughout the process, as well as observed for safety behavior pre- and post-intervention. It was believed that foreman influence was greater than attitudes from fellow workers. This study found that verbal feedback from supervisors made for significantly increased safety behavior among employees. On-site reminders of work hazards prompt workers in their actual work environment (as opposed to in a classroom setting), allowing for a more hands-on approach to teaching.

Wirth and Sigurdsson (2008) suggested that overstating behavioral changes of workers still neglects improving the unsafe conditions in which they work. In essence, this “blames the worker” instead of solving the problem at hand. A different study took a technological approach to reducing the risk of hearing loss in the mining industry (Kovalchik, et al. 2008). By Prevention through Design (PtD), the authors studied the source of hearing loss – continuous mining machines – and worked with NIOSH (National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health) and machinery manufacturers to redesign the conveyors. A case study showed this as a successful means of noise control, as it reduced noise exposure by 3 dB(A) and, although it increased cost by 20%, it also increased the life of the equipment threefold.

In a report on safety in agriculture, forestry, and fishing (Chapman and Husberg 2008), the authors noted the high risk of hand injuries and the need for better tool designs for increased ergonomics and safety. Though this will likely increase the cost, the price will be nowhere near the price of a fatality. By workers demanding safer equipment, manufacturers are forced to increase the quality of their products. The authors further suggested a means of behavioral primary prevention through “embedded” lessons, whereby a regular workday includes a short lesson in a predetermined educational topic related to that day's task.

Assessing a Company's Safety Commitment

As safety climate is a temporal condition of current circumstances, culture becomes the better guide for determining the commitment to safety within a company. The aspects of safety culture addressed here are applicable to any industry.

Formalized Safety Plan

Formalized safety plans are official procedures that are established for reporting and addressing occupational safety hazards. This can include regular tailgate safety meetings, field demonstrations, and other formal communications that encourage the dissemination of safety information. Additionally, companies must have a system for formalized reporting of unsafe behavior. This can include reporting the incident, providing the individual with feedback, and/or forming a group discussion in response to an incident. In essence, the employees should know that both their unsafe and safe behavior will not go unnoticed, and that unsafe behavior will be

reported, without exception. Finally, this formalized plan should also include an employee whose specific job description relates to safety coordination. This person should be available to the employees and function as a liaison between the workers and management, including immediate superiors, when direct communication is not possible.

Informal Safety Procedures

This aspect of a safety culture encourages unwritten incentives for safe work behavior. For instance, some employers might provide a financial incentive for safe work behavior. By providing incentives, the safe workers know that their hard work will not go unnoticed and that they should continue to be safe, while the unsafe workers are encouraged to change. If the system works well, all employees are accountable because workers will try to be noticed, while the management is forced to pay attention. Other incentives can be as simple as a safe-employee-of-the-week award, or a free lunch. When other workers see that safe workers are being rewarded, they will want to play along, but management must be consistent for this to work. If the most valued employee is the highest producer, but is also the biggest liability, the company needs to reassess its priorities.

Dedication through Organization

The best judgment for how management feels about safety is how it prioritizes safety in its decision-making processes. This commitment to safety from management can range from budgeting production costs such that safe behavior is practical, to encouraging employees to seek additional education, such as certifications or training. Companies might account for time employees spend stretching prior to beginning tree work, or they might provide aerial rescue training on rainy days. This accountability from management can also help forge a positive relationship between them and the field workers.

Key Personnel

Finally, one of the crucial aspects of a good safety culture is commitment from the direct supervisors, including foremen, managers, or other direct reporting officers. These people are key to promoting upper management's values. Not only must they demonstrate good behavior themselves, they must also promote management's commitment to safety by encouraging workers to follow suit.

Ideas for Creating a Positive Safety Culture

Beyond the four aforementioned aspects, promoting safety becomes a sales pitch from the top down. When management encourages supervisors to be safe, these people, in turn, encourage foremen or workers to be safe, who, in turn, encourage their coworkers to be safe. This can happen through a detailed and positive approach that involves all employees.

Upper management must take the time to visit crews as frequently as practicable. By making an appearance, employers are reminded how the day-to-day job site functions. It is at this time that employers might find that there is a problem that can be resolved by making a site visit. For example, employers might find it valuable to ask workers why they are not wearing hearing protection. By doing this, they might learn that the earplugs that the company furnished are uncomfortable, but that workers would wear a different brand. By their opening this line of communication, a solution might present itself.

As addressed by Olsen, et al. and Alvero, et al., modeling is a key component to a person's likelihood of performing the desired task. Proper modeling is essential in the workplace by all members. Despite the number of years worked in the industry or how little time one spends on the job site, everyone should be held to the same high safety standards. Especially with young and impressionable new employees, it is important to remove the stigma of PPE being "uncool." Instead, employees (especially upper management and foremen) should always model the

behavior they want to see in their employees. Proper modeling will help foster a safer workplace for everyone involved.

Similarly, supervisors should never turn a blind eye to bad behavior. Supervisors have the ability and obligation to correct workers and provide constructive feedback. By remaining attuned to all workers' behavior, supervisors can quickly spot and correct unsafe behavior. Unsafe conditions should be addressed immediately, but unsafe behaviors should be corrected when it is safe to do so. For example, if an employee were about to cut a branch that was improperly rigged, the supervisor should address the situation immediately before an incident occurs. However, if employees were feeding a chipper street-side, it might be advisable to wait until they finish feeding that pile before directing them to feed curbside in the future. This is clearly a judgment call that will vary for every situation. What is most important is that supervisors be consistent in their rewarding and reprimanding. This will make employees accountable for their every action.

When evaluating employees, it is of utmost importance to praise them for their safe work practices, in addition to their production. Without positive reinforcement or incentive programs, employees have little motivation to maintain their safe behavior. At the beginning of the workday, employees should be guided through a job briefing that addresses hazardous conditions, safety measures, roles, and action plans. At the end of the day, it might be valuable to reflect on the positive safety moments, including teaching opportunities and safety suggestions that were imparted.

Most important, all employees must be involved in the safety management process. By working together, employers and employees understand each other's roles, and become accountable for their own. Positive lines of communication among all parties build dedication, collaboration, and confidence in one another.

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