Improving Workplace Safety with Recognition and Rewards Programs
A How-To Guide for Long-Term Behavior Change
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The Problem: Workplace Injuries, Illnesses, and Fatalities

Workplace injury is a widespread problem that affects organizational effectiveness and employee health, safety, and well-being. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), each year there are 317 million non-fatal occupational accidents and 321,000 deaths from occupational accidents. The leading causes of fatal and non-fatal workplace injuries are overexertion, transportation incidents, falls, slips and trips, and contact with objects and equipment.

Organizations pay a heavy price for workplace injuries in terms of workers’ compensation costs, employee health decline, safety and morale, lost productivity, and an increase in absenteeism. The ILO estimates that occupational accidents and diseases result in an annual 4 percent loss in global gross domestic product (GDP), or about US$2.8 trillion, in direct and indirect costs of injuries and diseases. Consequently, researchers and organizations alike are striving to identify ways to reduce these workplace safety incidents and their resultant injuries, illnesses and fatalities.

The Solution: Creating a Positive Safety Climate through Safety Recognition and Rewards Programs

One sure-fire way to decrease workplace safety incidents is to increase workplace safety behaviors. Occupational health and safety research suggests that safety programs are most effective at increasing safety behaviors long-term and reducing workplace safety incidents if they serve to reinforce an organization’s climate of safety and are designed to proactively recognize and reward desirable safety behaviors.
Creating a Recognition & Rewards Program for Workplace Safety

Ongoing Communication Around Organizational Safety Climate

1. Set Rate-Based & Compliance-Based Safety Goals
2. Pair Safety Behaviors with Recognition & Rewards
3. Develop a Tracking & Reporting System
4. Implement the Program
5. Provide Ongoing Training & Reinforcement
6. Analyze Results and Gather Feedback
7. Evaluate the Program’s Success

Continuous Feedback Loop
Organizational Safety Climate

In the U.S., the Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) requires that employers provide their employees with a safe working environment and comply with federal safety regulations. While OSHA enforces these regulations through worksite inspections and recording requirements, it’s up to employers to create an organizational climate that prioritizes safety, even in the face of competing organizational goals. A positive safety climate exists when employees believe that safety is valued and expected by their organization, which leads to increased safety performance and, as a result, reduced workplace accident and injury rates. Conversely, a poor safety climate has been linked to increases in workplace accident and injury rates as well as accident underreporting. It is important to emphasize that organizations with high rates of underreporting do not have fewer accidents, just fewer reports of accidents. These organizations are likely to incur long-term costs in terms of poor employee health, safety and morale, lost productivity, OSHA violations, increased absenteeism and turnover, as well as an inability to identify and remedy the sources of accidents.

Research emphasizes that managerial commitment is key to the promotion, maintenance, and reinforcement of a positive safety climate. All levels of management, from senior executives to frontline supervisors, must publicly commit to, communicate, and more importantly, treat safety as a priority. They can effectively do so through a safety program that is designed to recognize and reward appropriate safety behaviors.

Recognizing & Rewarding Workplace Safety

Managerial reinforcement of safety performance should be positive, proactive, and designed to help employees understand when, where, and what forms of safety behaviors are expected. Recognizing and rewarding employees for compliance with safety protocols and successful progression toward and achievement of their safety goals is one way to develop, and more importantly, reinforce, an organizational norm that working safely is valued and expected.

Any incentives-based safety program must be carefully structured and uniformly administered; otherwise, it will fail to increase safety performance or result in long-lasting behavioral changes. Put another way, all managers and employees must understand what the safety program is designed to accomplish and how their performance will be measured, evaluated, and rewarded.

To be successful, every safety program should include the following fundamental elements:

1.) Structured Program. The safety incentives program must have a clear path to success in the form of well-defined safety goals (see page 6), regular feedback and reinforcement of these goals, and clearly outlined rewards and recognition incentives that are paired with specific behaviors or outcomes.
2.) Reinforcement of Safety Behaviors. To reinforce safety behaviors and continued progression toward safety goals, feedback is essential. Feedback lets employees know how well they are progressing toward and achieving their safety goals, allowing them to adjust their efforts to meet those goals. Feedback, however, must be specific and timely. Regularly auditing performance against the goal through, for example, random walk-around safety inspections, is ideal.

3.) Recognition and Rewards Framework. In an incentives-based safety program, feedback can take on many forms, from informational to monetary. When rewards are offered, however, they must be tailored to a specific set of safety behaviors. In other words, simply distributing recognition, prizes, and other rewards without pairing them with a clear, consistent set of behavioral contingencies reduces the potential to achieve the desired outcome, and may result in decreased employee engagement and goal motivation. The pairings of behaviors with rewards should be outlined prior to implementation of the program and uniformly and consistently distributed. For example, individual-level safety compliance might be rewarded with public praise or a note card, while unit-level safety compliance might be rewarded with a plaque or a luncheon. As another example, a program might reward workers with a luncheon for achieving a quarterly safety goal and provide a separate reward, such as personal reward, to the worker who submitted the best safety suggestion during that same evaluation period.

4.) Safety Communication. A safety incentives program should be promoted throughout the organization so that it receives a high level of visibility. For example, supervisors should strive to regularly discuss safety with their employees and provide them with timely feedback. Also of note – communication about safety typically incorporates visual materials; these are most effective when they include colorful, attention-grabbing graphics.

5.) Safety Training. Training should emphasize safety practices and the ability to identify workplace safety hazards, and should be based on an assessment of need. Completion of safety training should result in a training certification and/or rewards consistent with the elements of Structured Program above. Importantly, training should be regularly provided on an ongoing basis to instill new skills and refresh old ones.

Communication and feedback is a two-way street. Employees should feel comfortable sharing near-miss incidents or their input on other aspects of the safety program, and should be able to do so immediately and anonymously. A platform tool, ideally one that can be easily accessed from the “shop floor,” can help address the larger issue of how to gather information, collect data and make it useful toward creating the right program.
6.) **Reinforcement Training.** All levels of management must be trained to properly identify and reward safety behaviors and coach those that they supervise in a positive way. A great way to do this is with on-the-spot recognition of appropriate safety behaviors. Having an inventory of rewards readily available reinforces the behavior in real-time and provides the feedback employees seek. This improves employee morale and reinforces a workplace climate of safety.

7.) **Program Tracking & Evaluation.** All aspects of the safety incentives program should be regularly monitored and evaluated for effectiveness and to ensure that program goals are being achieved. Evaluation can also serve as a tool to identify program areas that are in need of improvement or revision. Furthermore, management should create a safe place for employees to report accidents or near-miss incidents, so that proactive identification, control, and prevention of hazards can occur.

An efficient way to monitor a safety program is through a technology system that can capture incident data in a thorough way, identify the subsequent remedy or follow-up, track near-miss incidents and overall achievement of safety goals at the individual and departmental levels. In addition, tracking the expenditures of rewards provided for the positive reinforcement of these goals, and using the proper channels for reporting, is imperative for the organization to view expenses and then calculate the profitability of less down time and absenteeism from workplace safety incidents.

### A Safety Program Success Story

Alcoa, a company that manufactures aluminum, has been identified as one of the leading companies in occupational health and safety. Alcoa credits its barely-there lost workday rate to its long-term proactive commitment to safety. This commitment is manifested in Alcoa’s heavily entrenched organizational climate of safety, which is continually reinforced through its safety programs. Their programs prioritize safety over other competing goals, emphasize safety communication and individualized training programs, and recognize and reward behavior-based safety performance. Alcoa firmly believes that zero work-related injuries and illnesses is possible, a belief that is well supported by its real-time safety data. In the 12 months preceding March 13, 2014, Alcoa reported that of its 184 locations worldwide, 82 percent experienced zero lost workdays and nearly 40 percent experienced no recordable injuries. Furthermore, over that same period more than 99 percent of Alcoa’s employees had zero lost workdays due to workplace injuries and illnesses.
Goal Setting for Safety Recognition and Rewards Programs

Extensive research has shown strong relationships among goal-setting, increased employee motivation in the form of extra effort and goal persistence, and performance.8-11 Safety goals should be SMART (see checklist below) and largely compliance-based in order to be optimally effective.5, 8-11 Compliance-based goals focus on safety behaviors, such as clearing debris or wearing protective gear, while rate-based goals focus on safety outcomes, such as accident and injury rates. While the end-game of any successful safety program might be a stable close-to-zero accident and injury rate, such a goal says little about how to achieve it. Moreover, a rate-based goal may even encourage underreporting of accidents and injuries, thus thwarting preemptive hazard detection strategies.5 Compliance-based goals, on the other hand, guide employees along the road to success, thus setting the stage for an effective safety rewards and recognition program.

If a safety goal is necessarily long-term in nature, the goal should be broken down into shorter-term (e.g., monthly or quarterly) objectives. This “piecemeal” approach to goal-setting encourages continued perseverance toward goals. If a goal is too difficult or set too far into the future, employees will lose motivation and become disengaged long before the goal can be realized.

Finally, keep in mind that safety goals should be level-appropriate.8-11 For example, goals set to guide frontline workers should encourage the consistent use of appropriate on-the-job safety behaviors. Goals set for frontline supervisors likely involve monitoring and reinforcing frontline workers’ safety behaviors, whereas goals set for senior executives likely involve monitoring the performance of other supervisors and communicating priorities. In every case, safety goals should complement one another. Conflicting or competing goals will undermine an otherwise well-designed safety incentives program.

In sum, safety goals should be:

- **SMART**: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound
- **Compliance-Based**: Focused on safety behaviors rather than outcomes or rates
- **Incremental**: Long-term goals should be broken down into a series of short-term goals
- **Level-Appropriate**: For each employee’s line-of-sight and specific job duties
- **Aligned**: All safety goals should complement one another, not conflict or compete

Concluding Thoughts

Companies that demonstrate a strong commitment to safety have lower accident and injury rates, and consequently derive benefits in terms of reduced absenteeism, turnover, and worker’s compensation expenses, and increased employee morale and productivity. Simply put, committing to a safe working environment saves money and improves the overall effectiveness of organizations and the health, safety, and well-being of employees.
References


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