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Engaged Employees

Key Elements of an Effective Safety Rewards Program

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There were 3.7 million nonfatal injuries and illnesses in 2008, with 1.1 million of them requiring an average of eight days away from work, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

While the rate and number have decreased from 2007, the average number of days lost due to injury have increased, and costs associated with these workplace accidents have increased to upwards of \$230 billion per year, with 85 percent resulting from unsafe behavior, according to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

To get these numbers down, the implementation of a safety recognition program into an existing safety program may yield a more safety-conscious workforce with a decrease in loss-time injuries or illness.

An effective safety rewards program should include the following key elements:

- Rewards should be associated with achievement of program objectives;
- Encouragement and motivation by management for employees to participate;
- Clear communication of program's goals & objectives and execution;
- Consistency;
- Empower employees to choose what they want to select as a reward for themselves.

Though not a substitute for poor safety management, an effective incentive or rewards program can turn a good safety program into an “exceeding-expectations” safety program.

“Managers can’t rely just on training, equipment, administrative controls or personal protection equipment,” said Michael Levy, president of Online Rewards, a Dallas, Texas provider of incentive management tools. “They have to have a safe workplace program that reinforces positive behavior. The human factor is as important as any other element of a safety program. Engagement in safety issues over time is what reduces the number of incidents.” “While we know that engaged employees generate results, recent studies demonstrate that employees who are recognized during a down economy actually remain more engaged and willing to contribute above and beyond,” said Karen Renk, executive director of the Incentive Marketing Association.

Participation in training activities and engagement of employees is a fundamental driver of success, said Levy. “In a safety program, you’re not rewarding a single behavior. You want to achieve a behavior that produces no outcome. Employees need to be empowered. The employees have to care, and a rewards program has to be able to track that.” He said an online quiz about the program is one way to get employees engaged.

For employees, their experience is key to the program. A positive experience gives the program traction. “You have to make sure it’s a good experience, and the same experience every time someone goes online to measure their performance,” said Levy. “They have to know what to expect. They need to know what the program is, how to get to it, and what to do when they get there.”

In a program like Levy’s, a client’s program administrator is given the tools to control user access, by adding or deleting employees. User and activity tools are available to measure engagement. Administrators can also control the content on site, which can include safety information and quizzes. The provider then disappears behind the client’s branded site. Engagement is measured by log-ins, greater interest and excitement.

Engagement helps establish a culture where safety is a high-visibility item. It’s not just an outcome-based program. Rewards can be given to top performing teams or shifts on a quarterly basis.

Programs are available for companies with 50 to 50,000 employees. More sophisticated programs are available for larger companies, but there are no real cost barriers for smaller companies.

Still, incidents will happen. They’re statistically inevitable, and you don’t want a team, a shift or an individual to lose rewards because of the lowest common denominator, someone else’s bad behavior. Levy said, “award for positive behavior, but don’t penalize for someone else’s bad behavior.”

The reward has to be commensurate with the task. What are they looking to achieve? One incident can be extremely expensive for a company. “You have to balance what you’re asking employees to do with the reward they’re going to get,” he said.

With regards to return on investment, Levy said his customers are coming to him with a desire for execution. They’ve already decided there’s an ROI to safety. They want to execute a program that maximizes that return. These clients recognized the impact of safety incentives. They know they should put a program in place.

While cash may be king, it’s not usually part of an incentive program, said Levy. “Merchandise provides a greater ROI, because while cash is transparent, merchandise has a perceived value.”

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Dave Nichols, owner of Sequoyah Electric, a Redmond, Wash.-based contractor who employs 300 people, said, “Safety absolutely pays. The bottom line is we provide a safe workplace, and have done so for 10 years.

As an employer, the motivation for a safe workplace is financial. He says most of his employees are loyal and engaged, though they may have different motivations. He said his unionized electricians are professional, and are taught about safe work practices early on in their apprenticeships, but “we don’t rely on the union to educate for safety.”

He says an incentive plan is a good sales pitch for safety. “It shows employees that

the company really does care about you.”

The message, “Go home safely at the end of the day in the same condition you were in when you arrived,” resonates with his workers. A big motivational factor for them is the safety incentives program. And it helps engage new employees. Though he said you shouldn’t have to motivate people to be safe, safer workers reduce workers’ compensation costs, and the “guys have definitely embraced it.”

He has seen improvements in his injury and illness rate, and the program gets new hires’ attention on day one. “If somebody is not safe, they don’t stay with us long term,” said Nichols. Critics of safety incentives have said they promote unsafe practices, and non-reporting of injuries. To this, Nichols responds by saying, “recordable injuries are hard to hide. You don’t just cover them up, adding that safety incentives are not reason enough to falsify records.”

Nichols does a lot of work for jet manufacturer Boeing, and they don’t tolerate unsafe work behaviors, either. “More and more, safety is coming to the forefront,” he said. “And they focus on the owner side”. General contractors, and company owners are asking about workers’ compensation rates, experience modification factors, and other safety and incident related costs. “The lower, the better,” he added.

The Incentive Marketing Association argues that during an economic downturn rewards and recognition programs act as a lynch pin to a company’s continued existence. Amid growing layoffs and a rising unemployment rate, employees who remain at a company are faced with an increased workload and concerns over job security.

In a down economy with a President whose OSHA administrators promise more and better enforcement, reward and recognition programs are an easy target for employers bent on trimming costs in lean times. But Levy said, politics don’t have as much impact as budget and economic concerns. Federal policies are designed to make sure minimal standards are met.

Levy is more concerned with engaging employees by giving them the incentives and rewards they need to stay safe on the job, and to go home at the end of each work day. **FSM**

For more information about safety rewards programs, go to www.online-rewards.com or the Incentive Marketing Association’s site at www.incentive-marketing.org.