Quality leadership practices in work health and safety

Recommendations for leaders

Take seriously your responsibility for safety and health
The safeguarding of the safety and health of employees and other stakeholders is not just a legal requirement. It is also a moral duty, and it is crucial to business success.

Accidents, injuries and sick leave undermine quality, productivity, competiveness and company image, as well as impacting on the wellbeing of individuals, job satisfaction and corporate spirit. No leader can afford to leave safety and health to others.

Incentivise, recognise and reward safe behaviour
Leaders should give consideration to performance on safety and health in staff appraisals, and when making management appointments. The development of a safety culture should be linked to the personal development of individuals in the company.

Direct incentives including competitions, awards and bonuses can be introduced, both to stimulate the generation of good safety ideas and to reward safe behaviour. The company's safety and health performance should be recorded in its Annual Report, and noteworthy achievements by individuals and teams recognised and celebrated in corporate communications.

Lead by example
Leadership qualities, behaviours and attitudes are as important as systems and procedures. Leaders should display leadership by, for example, following all work health and safety procedures themselves, and not being seen to cut corners. They should take personal responsibility and show that safety matters, acting as a role model for others and challenging their employees to take ownership of safety issues.

Seek to introduce a safety culture
It is not enough to introduce new safety requirements on employees. Leaders need to effect genuine cultural change through a change management process which results in the creation of a genuine safety culture. Safety needs to be embedded in everyday business, in the workplace culture and in the company's corporate social responsibility policies.

Secure the commitment of the board and senior management
Active leadership by the board should start with the adoption of a comprehensive and integrated safety and health policy and the governance structures to support it. Board commitment and responsibility can be further underpinned by assigning specific work health and safety responsibilities to individual directors, and by always including safety and health issues on

agendas. This commitment needs to be made visible to the workforce, to underline the central importance of work health and safety.

Ensure the visible involvement of senior management
Senior management and other key stakeholders (for example, owners or investors) should undertake site visits and inspections, and attend toolbox meetings and training courses. They should use workplace visits to engage with staff about work health and safety concerns, giving employees an opportunity not only to identify problems but also to propose solutions.

Apply policies consistently
The work health and safety policies and measures adopted by the business should be applied consistently, whether over time or in different parts of the business. Implementation should not just happen 'when it suits', 'when there's time' or 'when it can be afforded'.

Workers should be able to see the genuine continuing commitment of their leaders to the work health and safety policies, to encourage them also to be committed. However, policies must be able to change in the light of experience, changes in circumstances and review.

Provide sufficient resources for work health and safety
Investment in money and management time in work health and safety pays off. The cost of poor leadership can be considerable—whether in sick leave, investigations, lost production, liabilities or the introduction of new preventative measures. Good leadership, with the resources to back it, can strengthen a company's reputation, enhance customer, contractor and employee loyalty, increase productivity and win new business.

Learn from the good practice of others
There are many good examples of high quality and innovative leadership in safety examples available from member organisations of the Zero Harm at Work Leadership Program. Leaders should seek to replicate good practice from these and other sources.

Implement measures appropriate to the specific circumstances
Not all good examples are transferable. Measures adopted should always be suited to the particular circumstances of the business, the issue and the cultural context, and should be based on a clear assessment of the need and the objective of the activities.

Leaders should always consider the safety and health implications of introducing new processes, new ways of working or working with new people or groups. Work health and safety policies and practices should be seen as dynamic, adapting and evolving over time. They should never be considered something rigid or bureaucratic.

Carry out regular risk assessments
Risk assessments should be carried out regularly and in an effective way by people with the required knowledge and expertise, involving the workers concerned. Where necessary, training should be provided in the use of risk assessments. The results of risk assessments should be analysed thoroughly and appropriate action implemented.

Ensure worker participation
Going beyond the legal requirement to consult workers on WHS matters, leaders should actively engage with them and provide the mechanisms by which they can become involved in the decision-making process. Workers will often have the clearest view of the risks they face and may be able to suggest simple and cost-effective solutions. Actively involving workers and empowering them to tackle safety issues can also increase staff morale and job satisfaction.

Ensure continual, open communication about work health and safety
Clear communication has been identified in the research as one of the most powerful tools for effecting improvements in work health and safety. As well as being concerned with the top-down communication of work health and safety policies, changes and improvements, it should also include upward communication from workers to management, and a dialogue between all parts of the business. A culture of openness should encourage employees at all levels to speak their mind on safety issues without fear.

Promote collaboration

Safeguarding safety needs to be everybody's responsibility, and requires that everyone works collaboratively. Workers and management should work together to address risks. Workers should help and advise each other. All relevant parts of the business should be drawn in. Collaboration with and by external stakeholders, from contractors to service providers, should also be fostered.

Provide adequate training

Training is vital for driving improvements in work health and safety performance, in the development of a safety culture, in helping individuals and teams to manage specific risks, and in equipping people at all levels with the knowledge and skills they need to carry out their responsibilities for safety and health. Sufficient resources should be put into training, and senior management should free up enough of their own time to undertake necessary training alongside those at more junior levels.

Ensure access to the expertise and skills the company requires

Companies should value and support their internal experts and those with responsibility for supervising safe behaviour. Leaders should employ quality assurance methods to ensure that those put in positions of responsibility are suited to the role. Leaders of small enterprises need to be prepared to draw on external expertise and support.

Implement regular monitoring, analysis and review

Monitoring and review of policies and procedures is a vital element in ensuring a safe and healthy workplace in practice. Measurable performance targets should be set and progress monitored. Incidents and accidents should be analysed and the results shared with management. The performance of current and past practices should be compared. Finding should be openly reported and the review process transparent to workers and other stakeholders.

(Adapted from Leadership and Occupational Safety and Health (OSH): An Expert analysis, European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2012)

Further information

For more information about leadership in work health and safety and the Zero Harm at Work Leadership Program, call the WHS Infoline on 1300 369 915 or visit www.worksafe.qld.gov.au.

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