



# Helping Supervisors Become Effective Safety Coaches

By Michael Hajasitron

Senior executives across industry live with the very real fear of one of their employees getting hurt. They know that the unique risks of the work they do put people in dangerous situations, and they have a sincere desire to protect everyone in the organization from harm. At the senior-most level, safety is a priority.

On the frontlines, safety is also a priority. No one wants to get hurt. Employees understand the risks inherent in their work, but want to know that the organization is doing everything it can to help them work safely.

Both ends of the spectrum share a common goal—zero injuries. And yet many organizations see this shared intention get lost in what some call the Bermuda Triangle of safety leadership—the “frozen middle.” This is the place where good intentions seem to mysteriously disappear in the mix of extreme production pressure and mixed signals. Good leaders caught up in the Bermuda Triangle can end up turning a blind eye to exposures and inadvertently encourage risk-taking that leads to serious injuries or worse.

The good news is the Bermuda Triangle is not inevitable. Even better, the leaders at the heart of this phenomenon—supervisors—are the ideal agents for creating and maintaining momentum in safety improvement. The trick is helping supervisors master the what, when, and how of great safety leadership so that they can lead their people through the inertia of safety improvement.

## Safety's "Bermuda Triangle"

Safety initiatives are driven by concerned senior leaders. At the same time, safety is ultimately about what happens in the factory, the field, and the processing plant. When leaders set the directive to improve safety for the entire workforce, it becomes imperative to transfer safety leadership principles and practices down to the site level. In most organizations, supervisors are the natural proxy for senior leaders in day-to-day activities. Yet this group often has a difficult time balancing leadership development activities with their other responsibilities that come with the job.

Supervisors are called upon to communicate management's direction, implement new initiatives, take on special projects, and keep the operation moving smoothly. Given all of these demands, they often have little opportunity to lead safety effectively. But when they focus on a few key activities—the what, when, and why— that align with their regular duties, they become critical partners in reducing exposures and promoting a culture dedicated to achieving zero injuries.

## Why Supervisors Are The Key To Success

Supervisors are best positioned to make the organization's safety goals a reality. They are management's closet representatives to the front lines and their leadership function makes them ideal for advancement up the ranks. Developing safety leadership skills in supervisors means better safety outcomes now and in the future.

### Supervisors Need To Be Effective Safety Leadership Coaches

To overcome safety's Bermuda Triangle, supervisors need to be effective safety leadership coaches. Strong coaches

know what to coach, when to coach, and how to coach. They are exemplary role models who understand how to communicate the organization's safety message in a way

that gets results and encourages people to go the extra mile for safety.

There are a number of safety-specific leadership tasks supervisors can integrate with their other duties. Mastering these tasks will provide them with the what, when, and how of leading their employees to sustained safety success.

## The What Of Effective Safety Coaching

In many respects workers take the words and actions of their site leaders to represent the company's priorities. How supervisors approach opportunities, what they focus on, ignore, choose to emphasize, and what they delegate to others all have a powerful impact on employee engagement and the overall safety culture of the organization. Qualities such as the perceived fairness of supervisors' decisions and the level of their credibility with their teams play a critical part in the process.

To be an effective coach, supervisors need to demonstrate the very best in safety leadership practices. They need to be able to evaluate the individuals and teams that work under them, know their safety performance strengths and improvement opportunities, and tailor their coaching to the specific needs of each person. There are critical areas supervisors can focus on when coaching their personnel.

### To Be An Effective Coach, Supervisors Need To Demonstrate The Very Best Safety Leadership Practices

**1. Safety Contacts** – Supervisors need to conduct planned safety contacts. Safety contacts are any interaction with frontline workers, initiated by a supervisor or manager in which:

- exposure is observed;
- feedback is provided; and
- a discussion is held to strengthen use of best practices and understanding of exposures.

Effective safety contacts engage the worker in a conversation about safety, creating planned opportunities for the supervisor to observe, provide feedback, and reinforce safety standards. But this communication is also an opportunity for the supervisor to learn about conditions and exposures.

Supervisors should offer feedback that fosters an open, two-way conversation between the supervisor and employee. Workers are more likely to take ownership of safety if they feel their concerns and opinions are being heard.

**2. Job Safety Briefings** – A job safety briefing is a session that discusses the work to be performed that day (or at the start of a task) and the exposures and mitigation measures involved.

Supervisors need to ensure that they are conducting engaging briefings that clearly define what is expected of workers before work begins or is resumed. They also need to confirm that workers know what is expected of them and that they follow through on the actions and responsibilities that are expected of them.

An example of a good approach comes from an organization in British Columbia where one supervisor has each employee take turns delivering the job safety briefing. Employees are asked to ensure that the topics relate to the work of the day and that they are interactive. Because each employee delivers a session, everyone is respectful of each other's efforts and the sessions are collaborative and valuable to workers.

**3. Life-Saving Procedures: Application & Verification** – Often rules and procedures that appear clear and effective on paper are very different when put into practice. When employees are trying to make life-saving procedures work while also trying to be efficient in their duties, sometimes shortcuts or workarounds arise. The danger of course is when these shortcuts provide real exposure to life-threatening hazards.

Together supervisors and workers in open dialogue can identify and remove barriers that compromise the effectiveness of life-saving procedures. If the procedure for conducting the task does not match the realities of the job, the Safety department should be notified so adjustments can be made to procedural documentation to ensure consistency, efficiency, and safety in future tasks.

**4. Physical Hazard Identification and Mitigation** – Physical hazard identification is targeted at detecting conditions and equipment that may create exposure to risks—whether immediate or potential. This activity is critical because eliminating exposure is more reliable than depending on employees to consistently perform desired safe behaviors.

Supervisors need to take appropriate steps to correct hazardous conditions. This includes communicating with employees about the hazards, discussing things employees can do to protect themselves and others from the risk, working with management to alleviate the hazard, and keeping employees apprised of the progress on eliminating the hazard.

Failing to follow through on each of these steps can lead to tragedy. This happened in one organization where there was a known hazard. Everyone was familiar with it except a new employee who had been on the job for only a short period of time when he was involved in a serious incident occurring as a result of the hazard. The hazard was common knowledge, but no one did anything to remove it.

How skilled are frontline supervisors with identifying hazards? Do they maintain a low tolerance for hazards? Do they proactively seek to eliminate hazards and communicate ways to work safely until the problem is removed? Leaders can ask themselves these questions as they create strategies for developing each of their supervisors.

**5. Incident Response and Root Cause Analysis** –When an incident occurs, the supervisor must respond immediately to care for injured workers, secure any ongoing, imminently dangerous conditions, and take mitigating steps to address the exposure long term. In addition, the supervisor must know how to ask the right questions to understand the root cause of an incident and establish and implement a successful plan of action.

In an effective incident response and root cause analysis system:

- employees leave the experience feeling that management understands the impact of the incident on employees and that management truly cares about employees' safety and wellbeing;
- reporting is unencumbered by systems or cultural barriers;
- analysis and investigation occur to the level appropriate given the incident's potential;
- immediate and root causes are clearly defined; and
- action items are developed that result in documented, sustained change.

This activity can be poorly executed for any number of reasons, including organizational policies pertaining to how

incidents are treated and limitations and/or application of software and tools used to investigate root causes. However, when this activity is done right, it can have an immediate and positive impact on employee participation in safety efforts.

Over time, as action plans are implemented and enhancements take root, the immediate effects will produce widespread and sustained improvement in the safety culture.

The best practices for this activity draw on the supervisor's interpersonal skills to care for the injured employee, leadership skills to manage the hazard, and the intellectual curiosity of supervisors to ask the right questions that will bring to light the many likely causes of the incident without relying on biases, assumptions, or pre-conceived notions.

**6. Accountability** – In some organizations “holding people accountable” is understood to mean using discipline or other types of punishment (e.g., smaller or no bonuses or raises) when responsibilities are not fulfilled. This is a narrow and generally ineffective approach, as it focuses on response to failure rather than helping assure success. In effective organizations, accountability means ongoing evaluation of performance relative to an established objective, target, or standard and providing feedback and other consequences based on that performance.

While we often hear people say “everyone is responsible for safety,” in organizations that excel everyone is accountable for safety.

Accountability is achieved by drawing on three principles: context, direction, and tracking. Context is about helping supervisors understand their role in safety within the organization—and understand how it benefits them. Direction is about helping supervisors develop clear objectives that tie to the safety objectives of the organization and enables them (through resources and coaching) to achieve those objectives. Finally, tracking is about measuring performance against objectives through well designed, simple, and effective monitoring processes and supporting systems. Tracking requires supervisors to ensure the effectiveness of the processes and systems and to use the data collected to provide success and guidance feedback in relation to the achievement of goals.

## The When Of Effective Safety Coaching

There are a few specific opportunities supervisors should focus on when working to improve their safety leadership skills.

**1. Safety-Action Plans** – Leaders and supervisors can work together at the beginning of each year to develop safety action plans. They should then meet with at least quarterly to go over the plan and make necessary modifications and updates.

Leaders need to ensure that safety is part of each supervisor's performance evaluation. Outstanding safety leadership should be recognized and acknowledged—ensuring that supervisors know how important safety is to the organization.

**2. In-Field Coaching** – Supervisors create opportunities for coaching people when they engage in the field and observe them in action. Coaching in the moment like this means getting out of the office. Supervisors need to be in the trenches, observing for themselves the realities on the ground.

For example, when verifying that safety procedures are being followed properly, supervisors need to make sure they are present during critical tasks so they will know if procedures are being conducted as intended. The only way leaders can know if hazards exist is to check personally. This means supervisors must go into the field and directly verify the real-life application of safety procedures.

## The When Of Effective Safety Coaching

Supervisors need to develop strong working relationships with their employees. The best way to do this is to practice a transformational leadership style. The transformational style helps supervisors create a vision of the strategic role that safety plays in the organization, challenges complacency, and develops other leaders who can implement the cultural changes needed to realize the safety vision.

Supervisors with a transformational leadership style are:

- **Challenging** – They provide people with a flow of challenging new ideas aimed at rethinking old ways

of doing things. They encourage individuals to stretch beyond their comfort zone by questioning dysfunctional paradigms, and promoting rationality and careful problem solving.

- **Engaging** – Supervisors help others commit to the organization's goals and values by coaching, mentoring, and providing feedback and personal attention. They link people's needs to the organization's mission with sincere inquiry into their work and personal status, including their struggles and successes.
- **Inspiring** – Supervisors set high standards and talk about safety objectives enthusiastically. They articulate a compelling vision and exhibit confidence about achieving it. They inspire people from the heart and talk to them as though they are family members.
- **Influencing** – Supervisors build a sense of mission-beyond-self-interest and a commitment to the organization's vision. They consider the ethical consequences of decisions, appeal to employee's highest values and beliefs, and raise their self-confidence. They gain people's respect and trust by modeling the behaviors they want to see in others.

### Transformational style helps supervisors create a vision of the strategic role that safety plays in the organization

Anyone can learn this style of leadership. It expresses the supervisors value for and emotional commitment to safety. When employees see that the supervisor

is sincerely committed to safety, a shift will occur in the organization's culture. Workers will stop taking shortcuts to get the job done faster. They will do the right things for the right reason—because they value safety and see that their leaders do too.

## Sustaining Momentum

From the boardroom to the front lines there is a shared commitment to ensure the safety and welfare of every employee. To make this commitment a reality, leaders can focus on developing the safety leadership skills and practices of supervisors. As the lynchpin of the organization, supervisors are the ideal leaders and coaches for guiding the workforce out of safety's Bermuda Triangle and toward zero injuries.