



Why Relationships Matter in Safety

By Judy Agnew, Ph.D.

Have you ever noticed how supervisors who have good relationships with their crews tend to have safer crews? In fact, good relationships tend to be associated with all kinds of good performance. Why would this be so? What do relationships have to do with safety?

Positive employee-management relationships include mutual trust and respect as a foundation for a partnership around safety or any other optimal job performance.

– Judy Agnew

The link is discretionary effort. Discretionary effort is that effort which employees can give at work, but don't have to. Discretionary effort is going above the basic requirements, and it rarely occurs in the context of poor employee-management relationships. Many people think of safety as a compliance issue—getting people to comply with safety rules, regulations, and procedures. However, if you want to go beyond compliance and create a high-performance safety culture, discretionary effort is a requirement. Truly exceptional safety requires that people don't just follow procedures, comply with OSHA standards, and wear personal protective equipment (PPE). Exceptional safety happens when people look for and report hazards, give peers feedback on safe and at-risk behavior, and most difficult of all, admit when they have made mistakes (report near misses) so lessons can be learned. You don't get this kind of engagement in safety when employees dislike, distrust, and (most importantly) fear their boss. If people think being honest about a safety infraction will lead to reprimands and discipline, then they won't be open and honest. In other words, you won't get discretionary effort.



Discretionary effort is created through the use of positive reinforcement. Research shows that when people are recognized for what they do well around safety and when reporting problems and concerns is met with reinforcing consequences (such as joint problem solving and problem resolution), employees will be more engaged in safety.

So what does discretionary effort and positive reinforcement have to do with relationships? Positive reinforcement is disabled by poor relationships. Not only are people less willing to use positive reinforcement within the context of a poor relationship, but when they do, that reinforcement is less effective. If you tell someone they've done a good job and/or try to show concern for their safety, but they dislike you and therefore don't care what you think, your attempts at reinforcement are less likely to be effective.

Having a good relationship doesn't mean being nice all the time or being soft on safety. Good relationships at work include accountability and constructive feedback. They are also not about being friends with direct reports or being someone they want to go to a ball game with. A positive relationship isn't necessarily about your personality characteristics. In other words, you don't have to be outgoing, overly friendly, or the life of the party to establish yourself as a sincere, positive, and fair manager or leader. Positive employee-management relationships include mutual trust and respect as a foundation for a partnership around safety or any other optimal job performance.

So how does a boss develop a good relationship with direct reports? Listed below are behaviors that consistently contribute to positive workplace relationships. These behaviors can be exhibited by any "personality type" and can lead to improvements in safety and work in general.



BEST PRACTICES FOR BUILDING EFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIPS AROUND SAFETY

Set clear expectations.

- Use pinpointed (actionable words) to ensure clarity of expectations; avoid assumptions and ask recipient(s) to state an understanding of the expectations.

Listen.

- Use active listening skills such as maintaining eye contact, using appropriate facial expressions, paraphrasing, and asking questions to demonstrate understanding. Avoid looking at or using computers and smart phones when others are talking to you.

Acknowledge good work, not just mistakes/problems.

- Track the nature of your interactions. Good leaders maintain a higher ratio of positive to constructive comments/discussions.

Ask questions to understand problems/issues.

- Avoid jumping to conclusions. There is always more to every story. Ask questions to uncover the details.

Ask for feedback about your own effectiveness and areas for improvement.

- Seek detailed information about what you do well and what you need to do differently to be more effective.
- Demonstrate that you are listening and working to improve your own actions.

Avoid blame.

- People's behavior makes sense to them, even if it doesn't make sense to you. Find out what antecedents and consequences were in place that lead to undesired behavior.

Respond fairly to incidents (safety and other types).

- Better incident investigations will lead to fair responses.

Admit when you make mistakes.

- Acknowledging your own mistakes helps establish that mistakes are expected and that learning from them is critical.

Solicit input and opinions from direct reports.

- Asking for input and advice will not only lead to better solutions, but in many cases, it also demonstrates respect.

Follow through on commitments.

- Consistent follow-through is essential for building trust and respect. Use whatever memory devices you need to be sure to do what you say you will do.

Stand up for direct reports; "go to bat" for them.

- Verbally promote direct reports and share their successes with others. In addition, acknowledge some responsibility when direct reports make mistakes.

Remove roadblocks in order to set direct reports up for success.

- The number-one job of management is to make direct reports successful. Analyze what gets in their way and do what you can to remove obstacles.

Provide feedback that helps direct reports improve.

- Pinpointed, timely feedback is most helpful. Don't save feedback for annual appraisals or even monthly one-on-one meetings; just-in-time feedback is the most effective.

Demonstrate that you trust direct reports.

- Give employees appropriate responsibilities and avoid micromanaging. When appropriate, tell them you trust them, and reinforce trustworthy behaviors.

Treat direct reports like people, not just employees.

- Make a point to greet direct reports at the start of the shift (when possible); show an interest in their lives outside of work, and demonstrate concern and consideration.

Clearly, these so-called “soft skills” are well worth developing if you want to create relationships that result in a trusting and thus high-performance safety culture.

To read more about improving safety leadership, read *Safe by Accident? Take the Luck out of Safety—Leadership Practices that Build a Sustainable Safety Culture*.

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[About the Author]

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As senior vice president of safety solutions, Judy spends her time helping clients create sustainable safety cultures. She also helps clients with strategy execution beyond safety, and general management and leadership improvement across cultural and generational differences. In her free time, Judy can be found on a pool deck, soccer pitch or volleyball court cheering for her two kids.

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