PANDEMIC PREPAREDNESS:
Propel Your Safety Culture Forward by Avoiding These 7 Mistakes

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Disclaimer

The plague of coronavirus (COVID-19) has presented personal, emotional and workplace safety challenges the likes of which many of us have never seen. For many, responding to COVID-19 health concerns meant completely re-organizing priorities and re-thinking the way we viewed our day-to-day interactions with our people and our environments. In one way or another, everyone's lives have been affected by the coronavirus outbreak.

Many have used this time to put an emphasis on the value of health and safety. Similarly, in the throes of coronavirus response, workplaces around the world have re-focused their attention on the value of worker safety. Though some newly adopted workplace safety processes might be viewed as "temporarily permanent," we believe that the re-focus on personal and workplace safety provides an opportunity for a long-lasting change in the way safety is viewed and can positively impact the organizational culture.

Helen Keller, a woman famous for overcoming challenging circumstances, once said, "A bend in the road is not the end of the road…unless you fail to make the turn." Continued emphasis on the processes below will help carry your re-focus on workplace safety past the turn of COVID-19 and into sustained cultural change of your future.

Beyond COVID Observations to a Culture of Safety

Safety observations are a widely known tool throughout the environmental, health and safety fields. However, this known process is not always implemented in a way that encourages employee engagement. When done in the right way, safety observation processes bolster employee engagement and provide a great repository for leading indicator analysis.

Amid setting up a COVID-19 response plan, your organization may have employed an informal observation program to gather insights from employees to bolster your response. Many of us were, and are still, in the uncharted territory of handling a viral pandemic and mitigating the risks to employees in the workplace. To ensure the controls are practical and meaningful for the different locations and departments of your business, you required input from the people who best understood how work is performed in their area.

The informal observation program that was used to assist in your COVID-19 response can help fuel the path to a more formalized program post-COVID-19; one in which there is a standardized method for gathering observations (such as software applications), and a defined process for reviewing and acting on the data. Safety observations can be a powerful tool. However, when organizations move to implement a formalized program, there are seven crucial mistakes that can lead to disengagement and disintegration of your safety culture.

Culture Mistake #1: Top-Down Mindset

"Yes officer, I did see the stop sign. I just didn't see you."

Often the first mistake made when implementing an observation program is that it is designed with a top-down mindset. Senior managers go to work areas and "observe" work. When organizations adopt a top-down approach, they end up employing a "policing" initiative under the guise of an observation process. From a worker's perspective, the top-down observation approach quickly devolves into a fault-finding exercise. If the observation program is mainly seen as a top-down, compliance and fault-finding exercise, employees will go into self-preservation mode, covering up mishaps or shortcuts to avoid blame.

In order to avoid the fault-finding perception, implement your observation program with a bottom-up approach and the Jerry Maguire "help me help you" mindset. After all, these employees know their workspace the best, and have the insight into how work *actually gets done.* To make meaningful change, we need their operational expertise. Employees and frontline supervisors must be empowered to complete observations of their work environment. Empowerment is not bestowed simply by asking employees to complete observations. To have true empowerment, you need to give employees the tools, time and training to get the job done.

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Culture Mistake #2: Programs Are Inconvenient

For the formal observation program to be successful, we need to be sensitive to the employees' and frontline supervisors' time. The workday is full of competing priorities. If we want employees to stay engaged in an observation program, we need to make it easy for them to participate. Often when employees hear the word "program" or "initiative," it conjures images of lengthy meetings, time-consuming forms and more roadblocks to getting their work done. However, when implemented correctly, your observation process doesn't need to be a barrier to work. It can be interwoven into the existing workday schedule.

Encourage observations during natural breaks in work tasks or during already-organized meetings. For example, taking five minutes of your pre-shift meeting to allow employees to complete housekeeping observations in their work area doesn't require additional time carved out of the schedule. In fact, it might help act as a final check of the work environment to ensure safe setup prior to starting operations. In addition to weaving observation opportunities into the current work schedule, leveraging a software application to facilitate the observation program can help to lessen the barrier to entry and streamline the notification and follow up by the managers.
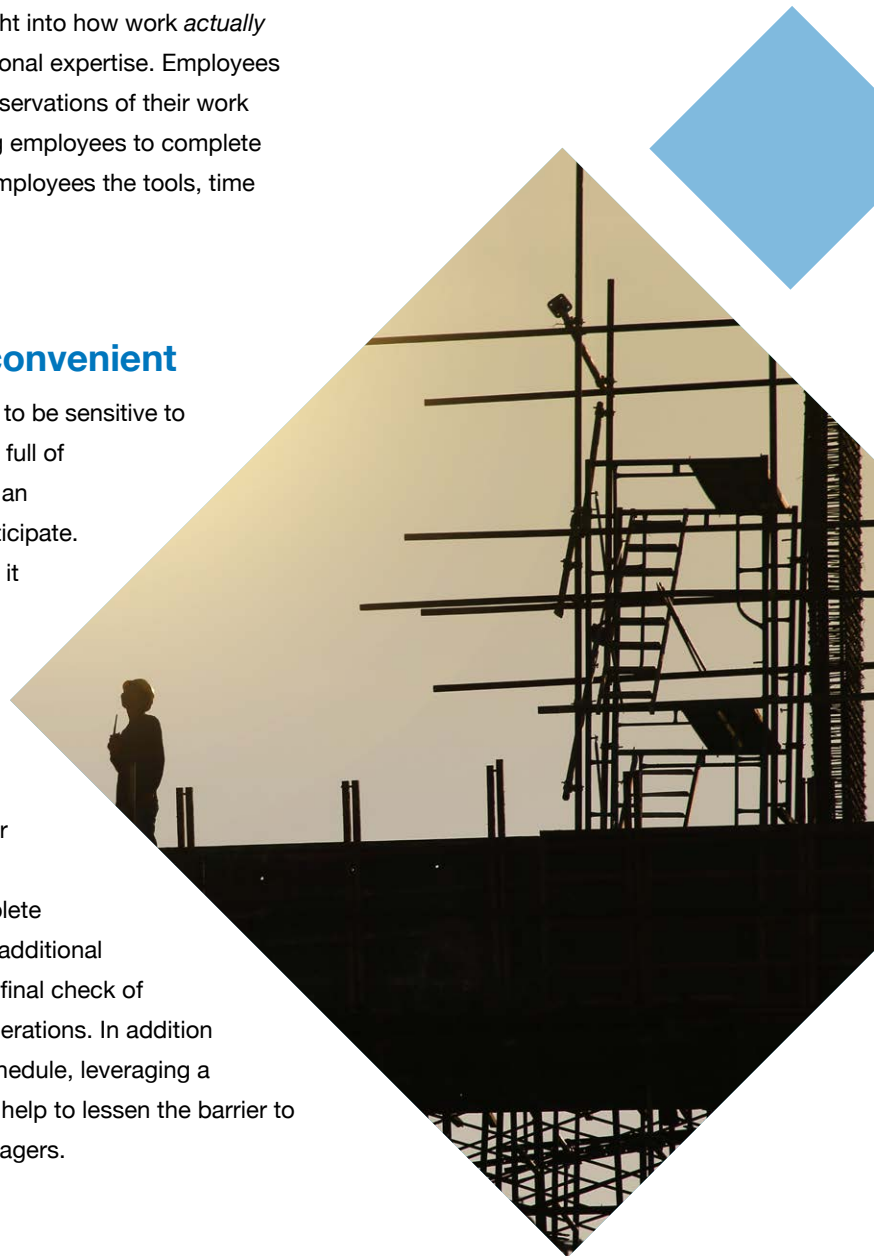
Culture Mistake #3: Shame, Blame & Train

When an employee identifies a risky condition in the work environment, we need to react (within reason) to the applicable severity of the observation. Obviously, some cases are more time sensitive and critical than others, but not every risky situation observed needs to end in a stop-work order, immediate re-training and more rules. Heavy-handed responses will discourage recording, conversation and fact-finding to avoid "shame and blame."

When observations are recorded, we need to have a conversation with the employee to understand why the risky condition exists. This might mean meeting them in their work environment where you can walk through the task together instead of scheduling a meeting that will hinder them from getting their work done. Meeting the employee in their work environment signals that you are ready to learn from their experience and work together to make a change.

Culture Mistake #4: Data Inaction

Another mistake that often is made during the implementation and operation of an observation process is inaction. Inaction occurs when employees submit observations and there is radio silence on the other end of the line. When employees take the time to identify safe or risky observations in the work environment, it is paramount that leadership follow up with them to identify potential improvements to their processes and systems.

Inaction leads to a belief that the observations are a waste of time. Employees come away feeling like "no one looks at the observations that I am making, so why should I continue wasting my time?" Even when observations continue, if there is inaction on the analysis and corrective action process, the observation quality will dissolve into a pencil-whipping exercise as a means of getting something entered and moving on.
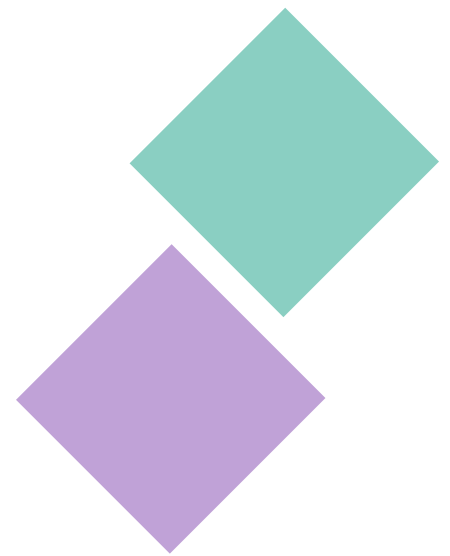
Culture Mistake #5: Fault-Finding

Taking time to recognize safe observations is just as important as addressing risky ones. Often safety is viewed solely through a negative lens. We need to make sure to take time to recognize the employees and departments that are completing work safely and, in some cases, going above and beyond to enact positive change in the safety program. Recognizing when employees are doing things safely and analyzing risky situations in a fact-finding conversation will drive engagement and help sustain your observation process, contributing to the creation of a culture of safety.

Culture Mistake #6: Drive-By Observations

The heart of any effective observation process is the conversation. Following every observation, a fact-finding conversation should take place between the observer and employee.

Often, an observation is only completed and submitted when someone is doing something risky. This policing — we call them "drive-by observations" — only gathers surface data on what was observed. Without the communication with the employees in the area, we miss all the rich details that can be gathered with a fact-finding conversation. This method reframes the observation from a fault-finding program to a fact-finding coaching process.

If people do not feel threatened by the observations, then we can focus on helping the team become safer, more effective and efficient, and thus gather more accurate information. Instead of finding "broken" employees to fix, we need to focus on the processes and systems that are placing people in risky situations and fix those.

Culture Mistake #7: No Data Planning

Remember that information is not communication. Meaning that, for the information — observation data in this case — to be useful as an improvement or change agent, we need to develop a feedback process for communicating the information to the right people in our organization. An effective feedback process for data reviews enhances the value of the observation program to employees. Creating an effective feedback process turns your inputs (data) into outputs (actions for improvement).

When developing an effective feedback loop, it helps to focus on the "4-Ws" of data planning: why, who, what and when.

- The "why" will help you develop the vision and purpose for the data reviews.
- The "who" will ensure you have included the correct people to drive action.
- The "what" determines the type and format of data that will be most beneficial to employees to promote engagement.
- The "when" will establish a frequency and timeline for the feedback process.

Information is not communication. To promote action and to provide value to employees we need to turn the inputs (data) into outputs (actions for improvement).

Coronavirus has changed our world in many ways, and the workplace is no exception. But with great challenges come great opportunities. Let's not allow the re-focus on safety to end at COVID-19 preparedness.

As we look ahead, we can use the re-focus as a launching point for sustained safety cultural change in our organizations. Successfully navigating through these seven cultural mistakes will help you to achieve better employee engagement, more effective improvements and in the long run, attain a culture of safety.

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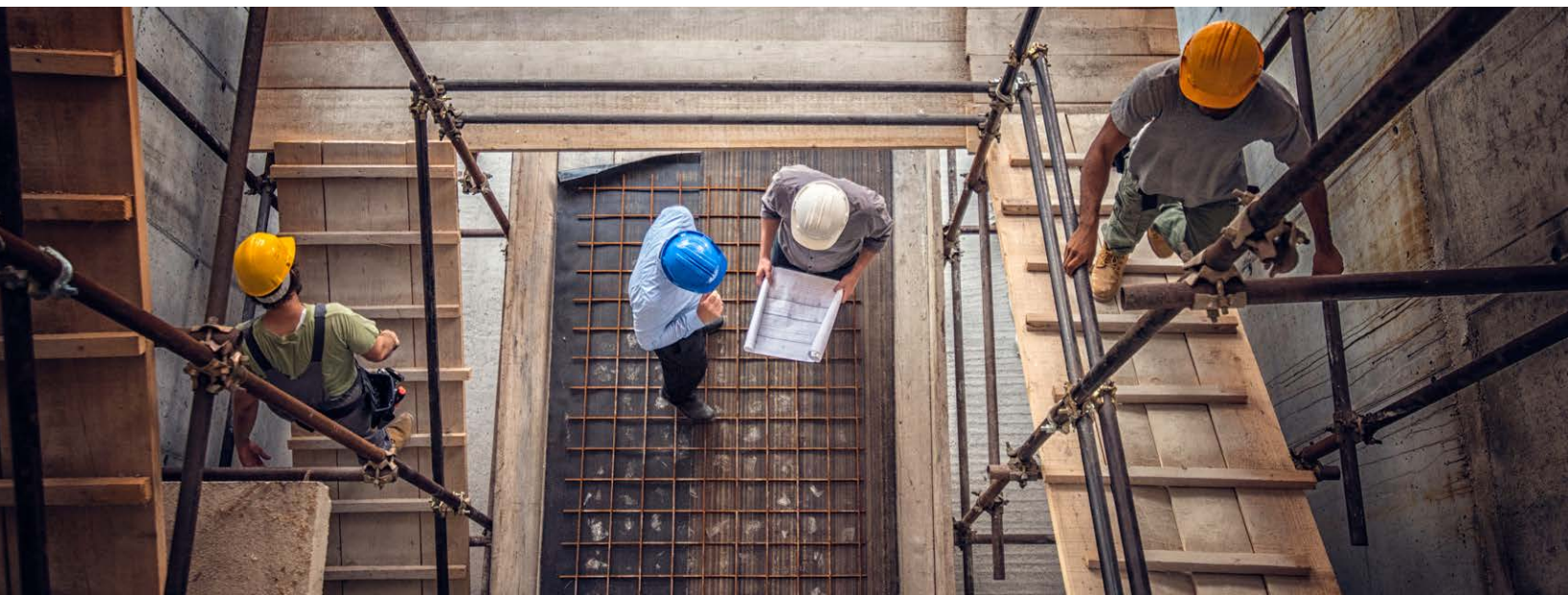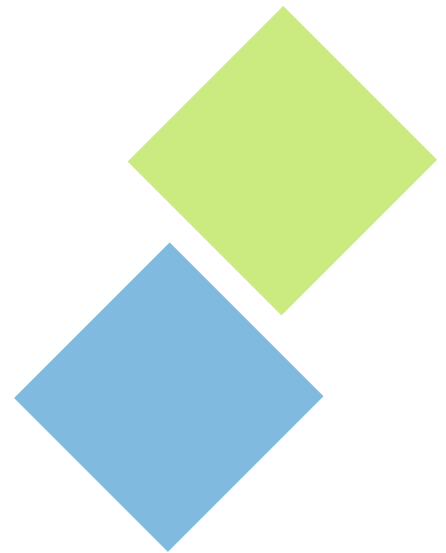
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