

Carrot vs Stick Approach and The Role of Safety Champions

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The management of a workforce can be very challenging at times. Often supervisors and managers have to ask themselves whether to give an employee the carrot or to use the stick. What do I mean when I say carrot vs stick? As a supervisor you need to know when to offer an incentive to get the job done (carrot) or when to exercise your authority and demand that the task is fulfilled (stick). People generally call this the carrot/stick approach, where a combination of rewards and punishment are used to influence change in behaviour. How many managers struggle everyday with that one employee who just does not work safely? We all know that employee who does not wear safety their boots because he/she are uncomfortable or that employee who slouches but complains that the chair he/she sits in hurts his/her lower back. Managers need to understand the role of incentives in the workplace and how this can be managed through employee engagement while still understanding that safety cannot be taken lightly.

It has always been my view that breaches to safety rules belong on the list of workplace offences which follow the disciplinary procedure. Unless an employee is taught the importance of safety, health and hygiene and understand the gravity of the lack thereof, there will always be a callous attitude to working safely. When an employee is disrespectful or tardy these employees are given warning letters, because such a breach affect productivity, yet every day on construction sites men work in sandals and at heights in excess of 25 feet without fall protection and nothing is done. Isn't this a matter of life or death? Too often, managers, supervisors and team leads believe that there is no reproof for employees who fail to work under the conditions that are believed to be common knowledge. The first problem with such thinking is the assumption that knowledge is widespread and equal across all walks of life. A positive safety culture is cultivated through thorough communication. Employees need to understand what is acceptable and what is not. A clear code of discipline which includes categories of safety infractions can be used as the stick to reprimand or change behaviour for the better.

Once safety is communicated effectively and the employees know the consequences of their breaches, and these are enforced, what methods can be used to positively urge them to continue to work safely? Simply put, employee involvement is the most important ingredient to the success of

any safety program. Once there is employee buy-in any safety campaign can and will be effective. Employee involvement provides the means through which employees develop and express their own commitment to safety and health. This process must start at the very beginning by seeking to avidly and sincerely gain employee feedback on the state of affairs as it relates to safety within the organisation, and then seeking any suggestions and recommendations for the way forward. With such a foundation, the employee-management relationship is off to a strong start. This level of feedback does not cease at this stage but is facilitated on a continuous basis through the safety committee or safety delegate.

To further encourage employee buy-in management can utilise incentives schemes advocated by safety champions. Health and safety is the joint responsibility of management and workers. Management is accountable for non-compliance to health and safety legislation and the assistance of a safety committee and safety champions, who are on the ground working daily, can assist the organisation to remain within the realm of compliance. Safety Champions must have proper training, resources, and authority to execute their function. Incentive schemes are not to replace a thorough and efficient safety system but support such a system and must be used as a tool to boost employee motivation. Waving a carrot at times can assist a manager when dealing with a difficult employee.

Management should follow these simple tips when seeking a safety champion.

- Seek volunteers from the staff; don't assign the task to a reluctant staff member.
- Give the safety champion the power to come up with quick solutions to certain problems, such as getting equipment fixed or replaced.
- Remind employees that the safety champion is their ally, not an informer or a disciplinarian.
- Train the safety champion in safety concepts such as Hazard Spotting and Human Factors Engineering — the science of why people make mistakes.
- Bring safety champions from different departments together regularly to share information.
- Check with staff members occasionally to see how well the safety champion is meeting their needs.
- Audit and review the effectiveness of the safety champion program.

Communicating information about safety is an important responsibility that should not always fall to managers alone. It is often better to have a staff member to assist with this role. Having a designated safety champion in every department demonstrates the organization's commitment to safety and may make employees feel more comfortable about sharing information and asking questions. Knowing when to discipline and when to encourage is very important, it can make or break the effectiveness of any safety program.