



Developing Supervisors and Managers as Safety Leaders: Leveraging moments of truth

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While supervisors are the closest management representatives to the work being done, there is often no clarity around what safety functions they should be performing, and little engagement of supervisors in safety. What supervisors do—and how well they do it—can have a positive impact on safety efforts as well as overall performance. When supervisors are doing the right activities in ways that build a strong safety culture, not only does safety itself improve, but the leadership skills employed can drive improvement in production, quality, and other critical performance areas as well.

The difficulty is that most frontline leaders today have little room for more activities. Supervisors are called upon to communicate management's direction, implement new initiatives, take on special projects, keep the operation moving smoothly, and, most importantly, protect people from getting hurt. Given all of these demands, how do we leverage the important duties of frontline supervisors with the essential work of keeping people safe?

This paper outlines key safety activities for supervisors, how these activities are directly related to the leadership practices that drive safety, and how to leverage them for supervisory development and organizational safety improvement.

What great leadership looks like

Think about the best boss you have ever had. This is the person you would work for again in a heartbeat, the person everyone wants to work for. What did this person say or do that made you conclude that he or she was an effective boss? Maybe he was always open and friendly but held people accountable. Perhaps she always let you know where you stood and gave you feedback that helped you grow. Like all great bosses, that person did two different types of things: he focused on getting tasks accomplished and he focused on how the work gets done.

- Task-oriented activity is about making sure people can accomplish their objectives, such as working safely, e.g., providing the right tools and equipment, having good policies and procedures for safety, holding safety meetings and safety training, etc.
- Relationship-oriented activity is about helping to insure that people will accomplish their objectives, such as working safely, e.g., providing consistent feedback to people when they are doing the right kinds of behaviors around safety, making safety meetings engaging and relevant, modeling safe behaviors in all that they do, making the connection and balance between production, quality and safety, celebrating successes, etc.

Developing leadership among frontline leaders requires an approach that enables supervisors to build safety leadership skills while also building competence in core safety activities. Rather than doing one or the other in isolation, activity-based development enables frontline leaders to execute the activity more effectively while learning how to actually use the leadership practice—all without adding more to their workload.

In support of this strategy, we have defined a specific set of critical supervisory safety activities that are absolutely necessary for improving safety. These are the most essential practices; the ones supervisors must do to ensure the safety of their workers if they have no time for anything else. These activities provide “moments of truth” because each provides a unique opportunity where supervisors have the capability to strengthen the safety culture within a relatively small amount of time.

The five critical safety activities

The term “moment of truth” comes from Ron Zemke and Karl Albrecht’s research into customer service and is defined as an instance of contact or interaction between a customer and a company, either by the customer visiting a business, engaging

with employees, or experiencing a product. That instance of contact is an opportunity for the customer to form an impression about the business or for the business to change an idea the customer has about the company.

For example, if you went to a coffee shop, moments of truth would include the appearance of the store when you first enter, the interaction you have with the employees when you place and receive your order, and the taste of the drink. Each of these “moments” is an opportunity for the coffee shop to shape the customer’s opinion of its business.

Moments of truth happen in safety as well. In many respects, workers take the words and actions of their supervisors to represent “the company.” How supervisors approach opportunities, what they focus on, ignore, choose to emphasize, and what they delegate to others all have a powerful impact on site safety and the overall safety culture of the organization. Similar to customer service, there are key instances when supervisors can impact how workers relate to safety. Effectively taking advantage of these instances can profoundly strengthen the safety culture of your organization and lead to lasting improvement in safety performance.

Key Supervisor Activities

Activity	Effect
Safety contacts	Provide reinforcement and guidance, understand safety issues.
Job safety briefings	Strengthen exposure recognition and use of mitigation measures.
Physical hazard identification	Assure safe working conditions and equipment.
Safety procedure verification	Improve consistency in use of key safety procedures.
Incident response & root cause analysis	Care for injured, focus prevention efforts.

Table 1. Key supervisor activities and their effect on culture.

Linking Activities to Leadership Practices

Activity	Leadership Practice(s)
Safety contacts	Feedback
Job safety briefings	Communication, Collaboration
Verification Audit	Accountability
Physical Hazard Identification	Action Orientation
Incident Response/ Root Cause	Credibility

Table 2. Key supervisor activities and their link to leadership practices.

Through our research and experience with more than 3,200 organizations and their leaders in a variety of industries we have distilled five specific safety activities that provide supervisors with critical moments of truth that shape their safety culture (Table 1) and build leadership best practices (Table 2). We find that these five are common across many industries and are foundational.

These five activities are:

- Safety contacts
- Job safety briefings
- Life-saving procedures: application and verification
- Physical hazard identification and mitigation
- Incident response and root cause analysis.

How these five activities are done is as important as doing them. A supervisor who treats these things as a “necessary evil,” appears disinterested, or who fails to involve frontline employees can undermine the entire safety effort. On the other hand, supervisors who perform these activities in a way that shows they value safety demonstrate leadership and dedication create an environment in which employees are eager to commit to safety, and generally build a stronger culture. After all, to lead safety well, you first need to care about it.

1. Safety Contacts

Safety contacts can be defined as an interaction with front-line worker or 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.

Safety contacts provide the supervisor with the opportunity to develop his skill with the best practice of feedback and recognition. Effective safety contacts engage the worker in a conversation about safety in the workplace, 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. To do this well, the supervisor must go to the job site. Safety contacts can't be phoned in or e-mailed.

Feedback should be conducted in a way that fosters an open, two-way conversation between supervisor and employees. Workers are more likely to take ownership of safety if they

feel their concerns and opinions are being heard. Worker participation and commitment to the safety initiative are critical components of a strong culture.

When supervisors develop the ability to communicate about safety more effectively, their spontaneous interactions will be more effective as well. For example, when responding to a pump failure in a chemical process, a supervisor practiced in communication won't react simply by asking “how long it going to take to get the pump up and running?” Instead, he is more likely to initiate a conversation that focuses on the exposures and how to mitigate those hazards as the repair is made.

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. Job safety briefings can be required not just at the start of a job but also both when exposures change during a job as well as after the task is completed, when lessons learned can be discussed.

All too often, job safety briefings are one-way communications and the topics at times, can be out of context with the work at hand. We often see job safety briefings where supervisors read from a script in front of employees with little or no interaction. We have also seen many best practices and examples of high quality job safety briefings. At a coal mine in British Columbia for example, one supervisor has each employee take turns delivering the job safety brief. Employees are asked to ensure that the topics relate to the work of the day and that they are interactive. Since each employee has a chance to deliver a session, they are respectful of each other's efforts and the sessions are interactive and of high value to the employees.

Whether before, during, or after the job, the focus of job safety briefings is to identify ways to mitigate hazards and plan the safest way to approach a task. Supervisors need to be able to conduct briefings as an engaging, two-way discussion, ensure that workers understand what is being decided before work resumes, and follow through on the actions and responsibilities that are expected of employees.

3. Life-Saving Procedures: Application and 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. The only way for the supervisor to know if procedures are being used consistently and correctly, and if hazards are arising is to check personally. This means the supervisor must go into the field and directly verify the real-life application of these procedures.

In addition to verifying that procedures are being done correctly, this critical activity is also important because it provides supervisors with an opportunity to engage workers at the worksite. On-site conversations with workers can help clarify vague or confusing procedures and misunderstandings or misinterpretations that get in the way of proper application. Together supervisors and workers in open dialogue can identify and remove barriers that compromise the effectiveness of life-saving procedures, assuring that the right things are done at the right time to keep people safe. Supervisors who do this well will calibrate their observations and discussions in the field with procedural documentation in order to ensure consistency, efficiency, and safety in future tasks.

4. Physical Hazard Identification and Mitigation

While the safety contacts activity focuses on the behavior of workers, physical hazard identification is targeted at detecting conditions and equipment that may create exposure risks—whether immediate or potential. Physical hazard identification and mitigation is critical because eliminating exposure is more reliable than depending on behavior. Physical hazard identification broadens the supervisor’s visual scan beyond just the actions of workers to the surrounding, potential threats of a worksite.

Once a hazardous condition is identified, supervisors must take the appropriate steps to correct the problem. 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 address hazards undermines the safety culture by indicating that unsafe conditions will be condoned.

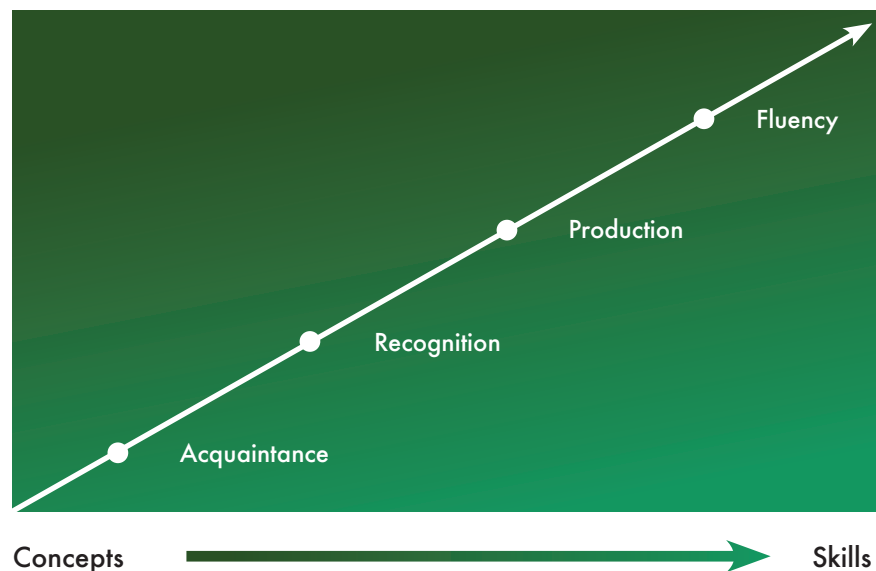
5. Incident Response and Root Cause Analysis

Incident response is the procedure management follows when there has been an injury, chemical release, fire, explosion, or major equipment damage. 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 longer 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 well-being;
- reporting is unencumbered by systems or cultural barriers;
- analysis and investigation occur to the level appropriate given the incident’s potential;

Building Fluency



- 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 politics surrounding the reporting of root causes. However, when Incident Response and Root Cause Analysis are done effectively, they can have an immediate and positive impact on employee participation in safety efforts. Over time, as action plans are implemented and enhancements take root, these 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.

Developing critical activities in your organization

Understanding what the five critical activities are is only the first step in developing the skills to actually seize the "moment of truth" and build a stronger culture of safety in your organization. Developing the capability to perform these activities in a genuine, consistent, and effective basis is essential for today's supervisor. This ability is known as skill fluency. There are four basic phases to developing these skills:

- Acquaintance – Being introduced to the concept or activity
- Recognition – Making simple connections you haven't heard or seen before

- Production – Using the information in a practical way, actually doing it with feedback in the workplace
- Fluency – Understanding the concept or activity so well you can teach and coach others

While the goal is fluency, supervisors and managers can begin to be highly effective at the production level.

Training or workshops aren't enough to create fluency with critical safety leadership skills; organizations need to move the learning out of the classroom into the workplace. This begins with conveying to supervisors the underlying concepts, the organization's objectives, and the benefits the safety initiative will provide them as they go about getting their job done.

It then teaches the effective way to conduct each safety activity integrated with teaching the leadership skills specific to each activity, reinforces this training with in-field coaching and other forms of systemic reinforcement, and tracks progress with metrics that gauge the application of the supervisor's new skills. Through this process, supervisors will see their growth, hone their skills through practical application and support, and realize peak safety performance.

Sharpening the focus

Challenging supervisors to become great safety leaders means supporting them in learning and applying the necessary skills. Practically speaking, focusing on these five key areas helps frontline leaders gain the fluency they need so they can guide others to optimal performance and build a culture that sustains success. Engaging supervisors in the process requires clearly communicating how they can apply best practices directly to the work they do every day—making their jobs simpler and ensuring that the organization's highest safety goals are achieved.