**Why Are Managers Important for Occupational Safety?**

*An Examination of the Literature*

**Manager Role in Occupational Safety Programs**

Management commitment and support are important factors for establishing and maintaining a safe workplace.¹ Managers are responsible for establishing occupational safety (OS) policies, programs, and protocols, and setting production goals that do not conflict with safe operations.² OS programs are workplace efforts (e.g. policies, protocols, initiatives) directed at preventing and protecting employees from accidents, injuries, and harmful exposures, and promoting a safe work environment.³ Safety protocols are codes of conduct that all employees must follow, and safety policies are written statements of an organization’s commitment to safety.⁴ Managers at each level of management (senior, middle, and line) have a distinct role in OS programs.⁵ Typically, the senior managers formulate OS policies and programs, middle managers implement OS policies and programs, and line managers enforce the OS-related protocols and initiatives.⁶ Strong commitment and support from all levels of management is the cornerstone of effective OS programs.⁷

The importance management places on employee safety influences the safety culture of an organization.⁸ The *safety culture* is the product of the individual and group norms, attitudes, and beliefs that determine the organization’s commitment to safety.⁹ The safety culture of an organization is manifested through the safety climate.¹²,¹³ The term *safety climate* refers to employees’ perception that their safety is important within their organization.¹³ For example, inconsistent safety feedback from line managers contributes to degradation of the safety climate and underreporting of employee accidents.¹⁴,¹⁵ The level of management commitment, OS programs and policies, production pressures, line manager support, and communication are important contributors to the safety climate of an organization.⁸,¹⁶

Managers are responsible for developing and implementing OS policies and protocols that support employee safety.¹ The perception of management commitment to safety is influenced by the provision of policies and the enforcement of safety protocols.¹⁷,¹⁸ Senior managers communicate the priority of safety through the establishment of OS policies and programs that accommodate safe operations.¹⁸,¹⁹ Line managers enforce protocols through the monitoring and feedback on employees’ safety behaviors, such as wearing personal protection equipment, following safety protocols, and reporting safety concerns to managers.²⁰,²¹ The production goals of managers should be accommodating of their role in implementing policies and enforcing protocols.¹¹,¹² Employee safety outcomes are related to the perception of OS policies, manager safety support, and safety behaviors.²²

The safety behaviors of line managers directly affect employees’ perception of the safety climate.²³,²⁴ The line manager is responsible for role modeling safety behaviors and providing feedback to employees on their performance of safety behaviors.¹ For instance,
employees may not be aware of an existing safety protocol if line managers fail to enforce it. The lack of line managers’ enforcement of safety protocols can result in the underreporting of employee accidents and injuries.\textsuperscript{15,25} The ongoing interactions between employees and line managers help modify and reinforce employees’ safety behaviors.\textsuperscript{26,27} The use of a participatory management, e.g. joint involvement of line managers and employees in planning OS initiatives, is associated with improvements in employee safety behaviors.\textsuperscript{6}

The level of communication between managers and employees regarding OS policies and protocols is predictive of employee safety behaviors.\textsuperscript{17,27} The quality of formal and informal communication between levels of management and employees is important for communicating safe working behaviors.\textsuperscript{28,29} The most effective managers provide consistent safety messages to employees about their performance of safety behaviors.\textsuperscript{25} Managers encourage employee safety behaviors by communicating the importance of OS practice, involving employees in OS decision-making, and demonstrating enthusiasm for employee safety.\textsuperscript{30}

Management must go beyond policies and protocols that encourage employees’ safety, and demonstrate sincere and concerted support for OS.\textsuperscript{4} Internal organizational factors, such as safety climate, are factors that managers can modify to improve employees’ safety behaviors.\textsuperscript{18}

\textit{Implications for Strategies}

Strategies that target the attitudes and beliefs of managers can help them understand they have a responsibility for employees’ safety. Managers’ commitment and involvement in safety is influenced by their attitudes toward safety, e.g. priority of safety, tolerance of rule violations.\textsuperscript{18} Training programs should target all levels of management to help them understand the link between productivity and employee safety.\textsuperscript{10} Providing weekly personal feedback concerning the frequency of safety-related interactions with employees along with regular communication of the high priority of safety are effective ways to improve managers’ commitment.\textsuperscript{26}

Strategies to train and develop managers to adopt a coaching-oriented approach to safety versus a coercive style can enhance interactions with employees and other managers.\textsuperscript{28,31} The quality of social exchanges between managers and employees is important for communicating workplace risks.\textsuperscript{31} Managers should be encouraged to emphasize safety when interacting with employees, shifting the focus from line performance to safety performance.\textsuperscript{28,29} Instructions on safety procedures, safe work habits, and preventive measures should be incorporated into the daily discussions between managers and employees.\textsuperscript{29,32} Managers with involved, decentralized and participative management style encourage employee participation and involvement in OS programs.\textsuperscript{6,31}

Strategies to redesign managers’ work role within the organization should be considered a priority. Integration of safety and productivity work processes can support managers’ role in safety programs.\textsuperscript{12} Strategies targeting the messages managers are
receiving from their direct supervisor (if applicable) should address the mismatch between
the visible and actual support received from management. Strategies should concentrate
on the reduction of unsafe behaviors and raising awareness of managers’ influence on
employee safety. The ultimate goal is to make protecting employee safety part of
managers’ role within the organization. The brief description of intervention strategies is in
Table 1.
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy Target</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Management Systems</td>
<td>Integrate employee safety into the organizational mission statement</td>
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<td>Establish organizational policies that support managers’ productivity goals and safety goals</td>
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<td>Provide performance feedback reporting on managers’ safety interactions with employees</td>
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<td>Provide a tangible reward to managers for safety oriented interactions with employees (e.g. recognition)</td>
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<td>Establish or improve communication channels between levels of management</td>
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<td>Training Systems</td>
<td>Provide management training on adopting an involved, decentralized and participative approach toward health and safety programs</td>
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<td>Educational workshops and seminars aimed at increasing managers’ knowledge on relevant safety topics and awareness of the link between employee safety and productivity</td>
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<td>Role Expectations</td>
<td>Align managers productivity goals with organizational safety goals</td>
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<td>Include managers in defining their organizational roles and safety performance goals</td>
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<td>Provide clear expectations for production roles and safety roles</td>
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References


