Keeping Everyone Safe

Working Together for Safety Management Systems

By: Michael J. Johnston
Executive Director Standards and Safety | NECA

Safety on the job is only achieved when there is an effective safety system in place and everyone understands how it works. A safety system is not tangible but rather a process that continuously operates to reduce hazards and prevent incidents. It includes core principles that protect the safety and health of employees. Establishing and maintaining an effective safety management system involves holding management accountable for safety by setting practical and attainable goals, defining roles and responsibilities, establishing effective performance measurements and holding individuals accountable for their responsibilities.

Shared Responsibilities

Job site safety is a shared responsibility between the employer and employee. Their philosophies on safety and health must be the same. This requires effective communication upward and downward and also with customers in some cases.

Electrical contractors depend on their employees to make decisions to keep themselves safe while performing daily tasks. This means that the employer should communicate their policies on all aspects of the company safety program. The employee needs to know the company policies so that he or she can comply with them. For example, if the company has a policy on energized electrical work, each employee must understand it in order to conform. If they don't know the policies, employees will be more likely to take risks that compromise their individual safety. Taking risks affects not only each employee, but also his or her family and employer if the risk taken results in an incident. Don't take risks. Know the company policy. If you don't know, ask for it.

Safety Programs and Policies

Contractors should have a safety program that addresses all risks to their employees. The principles of the safety program should be explained to the employees and emphasized as an expectation and an integral part of an employee's daily work. Throughout the day, workers regularly make decisions related to their assigned tasks; some are routine and some include varying levels of risk. Employees must understand and identify risks that impact their safety and health, and should fully understand company policies regarding safety-related work practices they are expected to implement. Effective safety policies drive compliance with not only mandatory safety standards and regulations but with the contractor safety programs.

Training and Qualified Persons

A safety management system must also be steered by supervision and managers that know the qualifications of their workers and place them in tasks that are within their qualifications. The definition of "Qualified Person" in NFPA 70E has been revised in the 2015 edition and includes requirements that one has demonstrated the appropriate knowledge and skill set and has received safety training to identify and avoid electrical hazards. The revision aligns this defined term more closely with OSHA's definitions. The difference is that demonstrated knowledge and skills are necessary, but to whom must the qualifications be demonstrated? In the case of electrical safety in the workplace, it is usually the employer.

The employer and employees are jointly responsible for worker safety. The employer is responsible for assigning qualified persons to perform tasks and operations within their knowledge and skill sets, as workers can be qualified in one area and unqualified in another. Qualified persons must have experience, knowledge, skills and safety training. They must understand the limits of their own qualifications, know their limitations and not be afraid to admit them. Employees therefore have a responsibility to know the limits of their qualifications and to admit when they are not qualified to perform a particular task or function. This is usually where the safety system breaks down, and it often leads to risks being taken.

Leadership and Management Commitment

Safety starts at the top, and safety must be seen as and treated as a core value of the organization. Leaders understand that they hold no greater responsibility than the safety of their personnel – the organization's biggest asset. An effective safety management system requires supportive leadership that establishes a common safety vision for the entire organization. Cultural change requires effort and persistence. Leaders must convey and support necessary changes, explain them to the team and most importantly, involve the team in the execution. Effective leadership involves more than talking the talk; the walk must be walked. Supervision and management have a direct influence on the effectiveness of how the organization performs, productively and safely.

Supervision has a critical role in a successful safety management system. Organizational safety practices and individual employee safetyrelated work practices must align, and there has to be a level of accountability for both employers and employees for the safety management system to work. Bad safety practices within an organization must be dealt with just the same way an infection is dealt with in the medical field – if the infection is allowed to fester, it can eventually result in failure. Leaders understand that there is no greater responsibility than the safety of their personnel. Real cultural change requires effort and persistence.

Safety System Structure — Why, How, Who

An effective safety management system is a framework of processes, policies and procedures to ensure that workers achieve organizational objectives in the safest manner. The system is comprised of administrative and management aspects, operational and technical functions, and cultural and behavioral aspects of safety and health within the company.

The leadership and management are responsible for clarifying the "why" of a safety management system. This involves commitment and communication, including documentation of audits and assessments. The operational and technical aspects address "how" safety management is accomplished. Regulatory compliance, hazard control and environmental management are some aspects dealt with through effective hazard recognition, administrative and engineering controls and quality safety programs. The cultural and behavioral aspects of the safety system involve "who" is involved in the system. In most cases, this encompasses all employees. The responsibility is shared and requires a team approach to foster employee involvement, motivation and attitudes and provide orientation training and continuing education.

Measuring Safety Performance — Individual and Organizational

To establish a safety management system, it is essential to evaluate the current state of safety compliance within the organization. The entire organization has to be part of this process for optimum results. If the company has a safety management system, it is a matter of evaluating its adequacy; here, it's best to involve employees to determine the strengths and weakness of the system over baselines. Once the evaluation is complete, share the findings openly and assemble a team to work on any identified deficiencies and gaps. Measurable goals for improvement should be set against baselines with an eye on business priorities, safety being first among them.

There is an organizational responsibility and individual responsibility to support effective safety management systems. It is rare that companies discussor even address "near misses" on the job, but it is critical in the overall safety system. Management must convey a genuine concern for employees and strive for an environment that supports employees identifying hazards and risks, and reporting near misses without fear of retaliation. Lessons learned must be openly discussed and acted on.

A safety management system can take considerable time and effort to develop, but once established there is a structure to live by. It serves as the foundation from which the safety culture of the organization is built and maintained. Maintaining the system involves continuous auditing for improvements and achieving a safer workplace for employees. With a better understanding of what constitutes a safety management system and how it works, ask yourself, "How effective and healthy is the safety management system within our organization, and is it supported by all employees?"

This article was originally featured in Flame Resistant Insights, Volume 05, June 2015, Web: http://www.westex.com/ezine/june-2015/