



The Accidental Supervisor

Insights

9.15.13

My longtime friend, Linwood Smith, V.P. Risk Management of T.A. Loving Company selected this title for a presentation he asked me to make at last week's Carolinas AGC combined Annual Safety and Human Resources Conference.

Linwood and I share several passions. One is to get the HR and safety functions to better collaborate in the ever-increasing areas where safety, risk and employment law issues intermingle. I have been preaching this particular gospel for years, and often present *"HR For The Safety Professional"* or *"Why Safety Matters To HR"* sessions to clients and business groups. The CAGC Conference involved joint panel sessions of HR and safety professionals, as well as separate HR and safety tracks where HR folks attended safety sessions and vice versa. Hats off to CAGC staffers Bill Stricker, Allen Gray and Letiscia Perrin. We saw some great discussions and the two groups had fun together.

Another shared passion is working to formalize how we select, train, and develop frontline supervisors. T.A. Loving, a respected North Carolina-based regional heavy contractor has more purposefully addressed this topic than many larger companies.

Our premise is that even Fortune 100 companies with internal "universities" often do not really know how they select many frontline supervisors and what factors make some of these supervisors "superstars."

The workplace reality is that often we promote employees who are skilled at their craft until they reach a point where they spend 85% of their time managing employees. We may have spent 10 to 20 years developing their technical skills, but once they join *"management,"* they're often lucky to attend an annual labor and employment law conference.

The construction sector is the best example of promoting from the ranks, but is hardly unique. Titans UPS and Federal Express are justly proud of promoting from the ranks and the "practical" culture this can create. Likewise, while I was speaking later last week at the annual Georgia Safety Health and Environmental Conference, one healthcare employer commented that her industry probably promoted skilled professionals into management roles with even less *"management development"* efforts than occurring in the construction setting.

Ponder for a moment how many legal problems relating to OSHA, retaliation and discrimination claims result from supervisor error. How many union drives were avoidable had supervisors

practiced basic management and communication skills. How many mergers were hamstrung by weak frontline management?

And rest assured, as in responsibility for establishing a “*safety culture*,” the ultimate responsibility rests with us in upper management. Lest you think that I am being self-righteous, I have responsibilities for attorneys in many of our 31 offices, and you should not believe that law firms don’t wrestle with the same issues. Even worse . . . we have to deal with lawyers. Sigh. . . .

Like so many problems, we know the solution, we’re just not sure how to get there. That’s why I developed my “*Accidental Supervisor*” training to teach a simple practical way to audit what you are doing right and wrong, and then more purposefully and formally develop your frontline supervision.

As a first step, consider which of your supervisors excel. What do they do that sets them apart? Define the meaning of a great supervisor in the context of your business. Develop a list of skills, competencies and behaviors for different positions, and then determine how the “great” supervisors developed these traits. Sure . . . to some extent, individuals may be born with innate skills, but someone somewhere mentioned, taught or set an example that assisted even those “born leaders.”

The next step is develop a development program, which deserves a later separate discussion.

HR “Tool Box Talks”

I want to propose one modest step to end this post. Construction employers develop weekly or even daily “toolbox talks” on various safety topics. At brief pre-shift meetings, foreman review these one page plain-English (or Spanish) summaries on fall protection, struck-by hazards, etc. So let’s develop “*supervisor skills*” toolbox talks and start using them to explain and repetitively reinforce basic management, HR, legal and safety concepts.

I pledged to start developing and placing such “talks” on the Howardmavity.com site and where appropriate our F & P safety blog every week or two. Hey, it’s an example of a small step in the right direction.

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