



# The Safety-First Supervisor:

Tackling the Six Biggest Challenges with Frontline Leaders



## SUPERVISORS AND SAFETY

Supervisors are one of safety's key axles, and safety managers who don't have the support of supervisors are likely to find themselves spinning their wheels.

When injuries are spiking and workers are disregarding basic safety protocols, it's almost certain that there's a breakdown in communication between supervisors and employees.

And when the injury rate is low and workers are avoiding at-risk behavior? You can be sure that a group of supervisors are doing their part to get these results.

Supervisor support for safety may be essential—but it's not a given. Many supervisors forget that employee safety is a core part of their duties. Others lack the right skills and knowledge to effectively support organizational safety efforts.

Lives are at risk when frontline leaders:

- fail to notice safety issues as they develop,
- don't intervene when there's a problem, or
- can't effectively communicate key safety issues to workers.

The supervisor guide will help you troubleshoot supervisory safety issues and figure out how to get your supervisors back on the road to safety success.

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## THE SAFETY MANAGER'S SIX BIGGEST CHALLENGES WITH SUPERVISORS

Every workplace has its share of complex challenges—from a lack of employee engagement to a weak safety culture. Often, supervisors are a major contributing factor to these issues, and solving your supervisory problems is a prerequisite to dealing with weak employee engagement, a subpar safety culture, or a high injury rate.

When it comes to supervisors and safety, there are six common challenges:

- 1** Negativity directed at workers, such as yelling, finger-pointing, or blaming
- 2** Unengaging group discussions, toolbox talks or one-on-one conversations
- 3** Not enough safety-related conversations
- 4** Insufficient safety knowledge
- 5** Low quantity and/or poor quality of near-miss reports and other safety data
- 6** Safety rules are broken or not enforced by supervisors

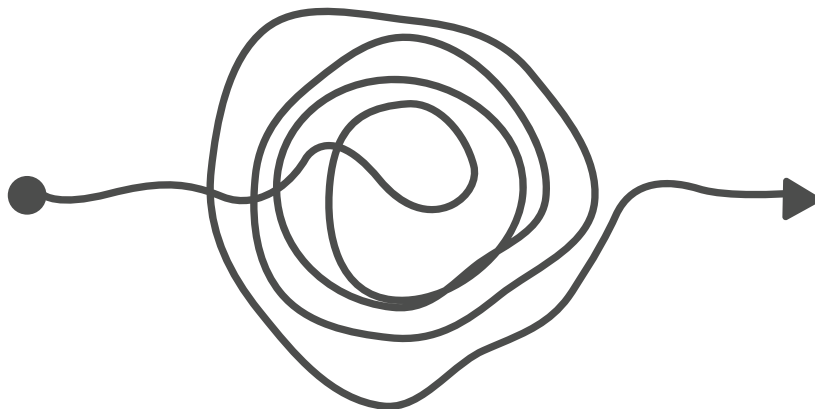
## THE SAFETY MANAGER'S SIX BIGGEST CHALLENGES WITH SUPERVISORS

Do those challenges sound familiar?

Each of them can thwart your organizational safety practices and limit how effectively your supervisors influence safety behaviors.

This guide will take a deeper look at each of these problems and offer suggestions on how to address them.

If you think your challenges fall outside this list, the end of the guide explores some universal elements to improving supervisors' relationships to work safety, which can be helpful in addressing your specific problems.



## **SUPERVISOR SAFETY CHALLENGE #1**

### THE BLAME GAME

# CHALLENGE

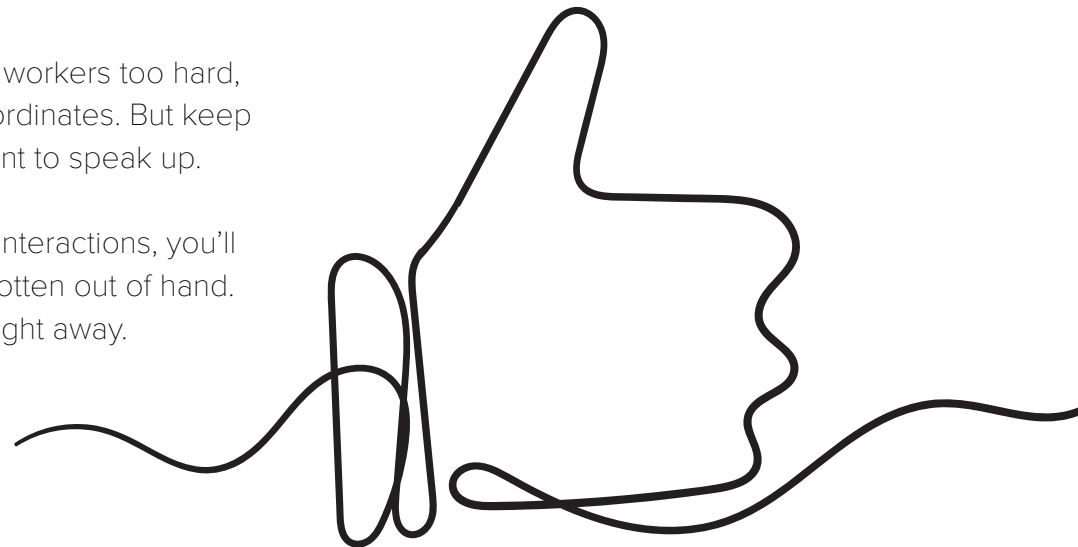
Almost every supervisor finds it incredibly frustrating to watch workers inadvertently (or knowingly!) break safety rules. And it can be tempting to yell at them or write them up for infractions, especially when they should have known better.

But being a disciplinarian today can create a poor safety climate tomorrow. When your supervisors lean too heavily on playing safety cop, the best possible outcome they can hope for is to achieve slightly better safety compliance—if they're lucky.

More likely, yelling at workers will create an us vs. them mentality, which will cause employees to start hiding incidents for fear of reprisal. Engagement will be nonexistent. And more and more injuries will begin to occur, all because supervisors were too quick to start pointing fingers or chiding workers when a rule was broken.

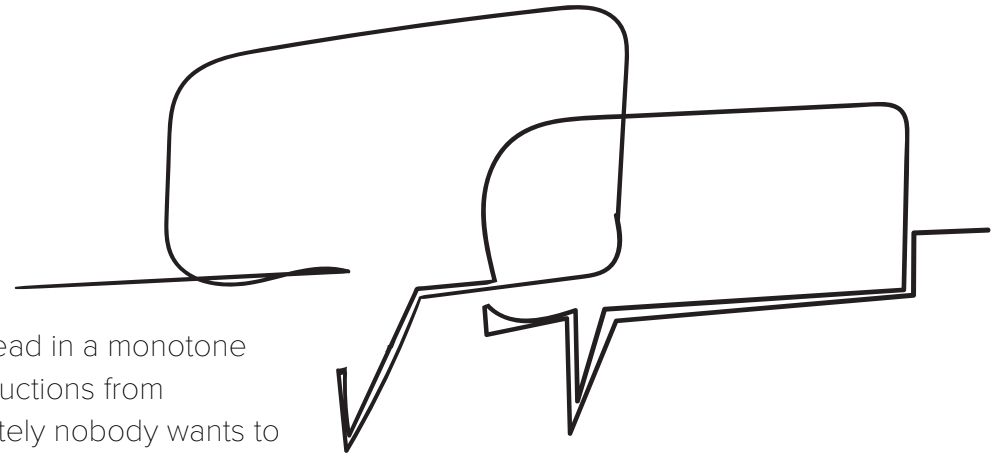
Want to know if your supervisors are coming down on workers too hard, too often? Go directly to the source and ask their subordinates. But keep in mind that if things are really bad, they may be hesitant to speak up.

However, if you're able to observe supervisor-worker interactions, you'll quickly get a sense of whether the blame game has gotten out of hand. And if it has, then you need to do something about it right away.



## **SUPERVISOR SAFETY CHALLENGE #2**

### COMMUNICATION QUALITY



Nobody pays attention to a toolbox talk that's being read in a monotone voice off a piece of paper. Nobody wants to take instructions from someone who can't look them in the eye. And absolutely nobody wants to participate in an uninspiring group discussion about who-knows-what.

The quality of supervisor communications on safety issues can have a dramatic impact on safety performance. Even if supervisors aren't poisoning the safety climate with negative interactions (see Supervisor Safety Challenge #1), lackluster communication styles can limit employee buy-in for safety.

To tell how effectively supervisors are talking with workers about safety, look for these signs:

- The supervisor's crew shares a common safety language and uses the same safety terms.
- Everyone understands how to submit near-miss and incident reports.
- Employees are aware of hazards and other safety issues.
- Safety stories are regularly told in conversations.
- Workers seem engaged in safety discussions.
- There is an increase in communication (and not just about safety).
- Employees volunteer for safety initiatives.

If you notice relatively few—or none—of these traits among a supervisor's team then it may mean that the supervisor is a poor safety communicator.

## **SUPERVISOR SAFETY CHALLENGE #3**

### TALKING ABOUT SAFETY

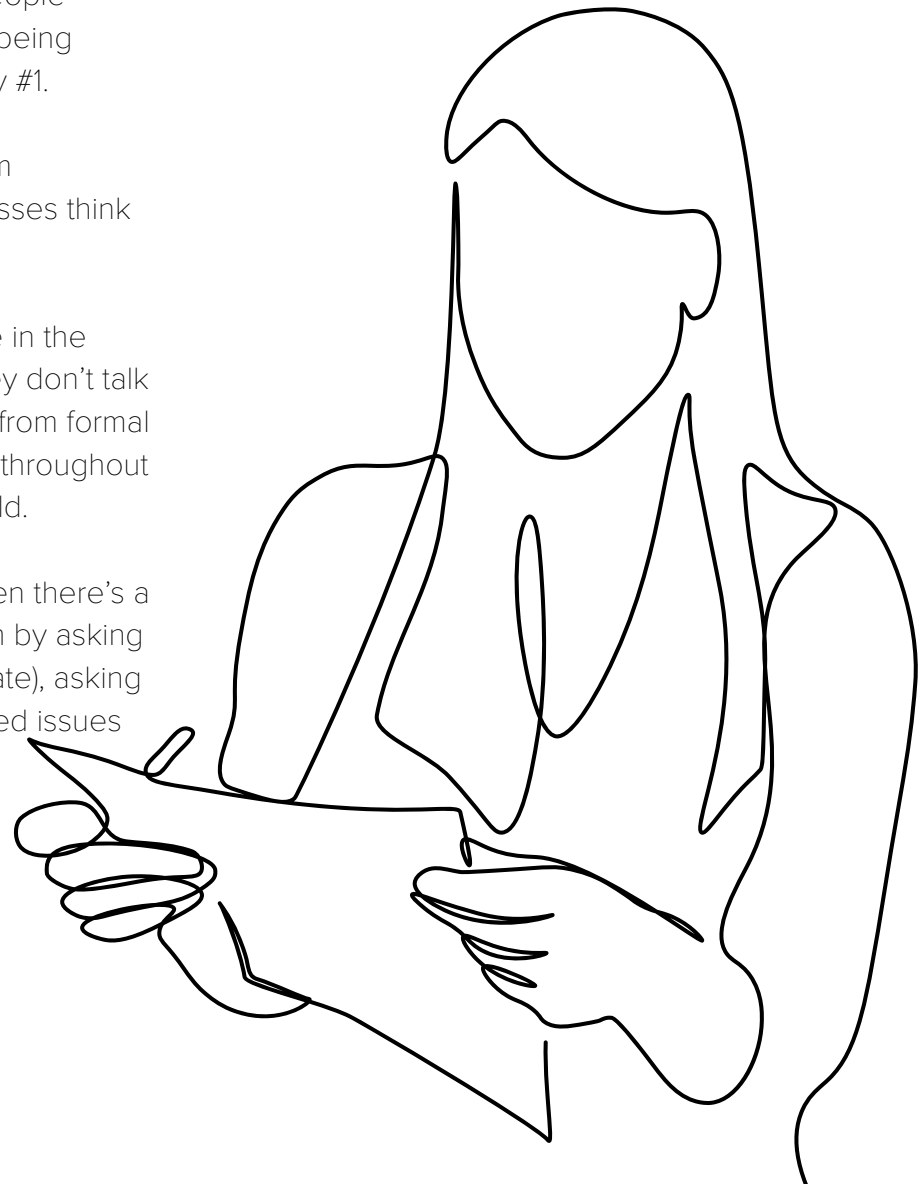
# CHALLENGE

Workers know what a company values by how frequently the people in charge talk about things. So when employees are constantly being reminded about a production deadline, they think that it's priority #1.

And when safety almost never gets talked about? That tells them everything they need to know about just how important their bosses think it is.

It doesn't matter if supervisors are great communicators, believe in the value of near-miss reports, or have a Ph.D. in safety theory. If they don't talk about safety issues on a regular basis and in a variety of ways—from formal discussions at pre-shift meetings to casual chats and reminders throughout the day—then they aren't keeping workers as safe as they should.

If you're unsure how often your supervisors talk about safety, then there's a decent chance that they don't do it enough. But you can confirm by asking them (though keep in mind that self-reporting isn't always accurate), asking the workers, or by counting how often they mention safety-related issues over a couple days and then extrapolating from there.







## **SUPERVISOR SAFETY CHALLENGE #4**

### SAFETY KNOW-HOW

Safety managers can only be in one place at a time. On larger worksites, they have to rely on supervisors to act as their proxies by spotting hazards, reacting to changing conditions, and intervening when workers take unsafe actions.

But supervisors can only act as a delegate if they know what to look for and how to respond. And that's where things get tricky.

Obvious hazards are exactly that—obvious. Anyone can spot a spinning blade or forklift in motion and recognize that it could seriously hurt someone. But how many of your supervisors think to check if their workers are tired before they climb into the driver's seat, because they're aware that fatigue will affect their ability to drive safely? And do they know how to recognize when operational pressures may entice employees to take shortcuts, and then ensure they're more vocal and vigilant than usual about safety during these times?

The majority of supervisors have some basic safety knowledge, though some may be lacking even that. Many don't have the ability to recognize subtle but potentially dangerous issues. And most don't have a working understanding of human factors—which means that they can't intervene when the risk of injury is elevated because workers are rushing, frustrated or complacent.

## **SUPERVISOR SAFETY CHALLENGE #4**

### SAFETY KNOW-HOW

# CHALLENGE

Research into incidents of all sizes, from deadly failures in the airline industry to recurring issues on the shop floor like slips, trips and falls,<sup>1</sup> shows that human factors are a major contributor to the majority of workplace injuries and fatalities. If your supervisors don't know how to spot and talk about human factors, then how can they take steps to protect workers from them?



<sup>1</sup>“Understanding how human factors affect slips, trips and falls”, Safety Daily Advisor, 2015.

“A Human Error Analysis of Commercial Aviation Accidents Using the Human Factors Analysis and Classification System”, U.S. Department of Transportation, February 2001.



## **SUPERVISOR SAFETY CHALLENGE #5**

### REPORTS AND DATA

Sometimes you don't need to look at supervisors to tell how they're performing safety-wise. You can just look at the data—or in some cases, lack of data. Their unwillingness or inability to help collect information is a big sign they don't see its importance.

Don't think this is a problem in your workplace? Statistically speaking, it probably is. In reporting on an OSHA analysis of serious injuries, the Washington Post uncovered that only half of all serious injuries are likely documented.<sup>2</sup> It's not hard to believe that less severe injuries are even less frequently reported.

It's safe to say that safety reporting is an issue in the majority of workplaces—especially ones where supervisors aren't doing their part to track safety incidents.

Potential symptoms of supervisors not understanding the value of safety data and reporting operations include:

- few near-miss/incident reports,
- low-quality near-miss/incident reports,
- inconsistent reporting frequency,
- some workers or areas of operations don't submit reports, and
- confusing, contradictory or “muddy” safety data

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<sup>2</sup>“Report of 10,000 severe workplace injuries might be only half the problem”, The Washington Post, March 18, 2016.

## **SUPERVISOR SAFETY CHALLENGE #5**

### REPORTS AND DATA

# CHALLENGE

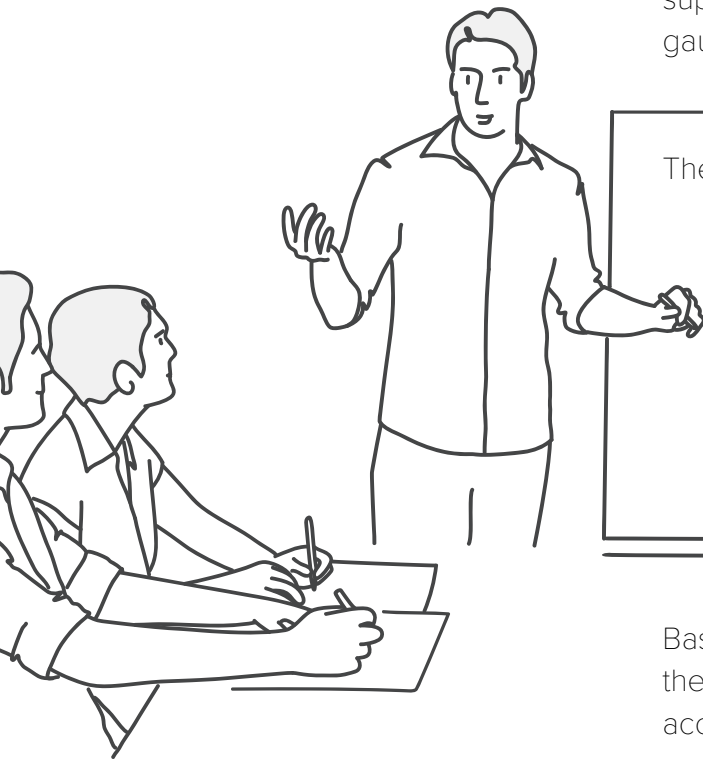
Other signs of problems include workers who don't understand how to submit reports or don't get the importance of reporting incidents, and frustrated employees who feel like their reports aren't being made use of.

Keep in mind that supervisors are only one of several potential causes of safety reporting and data challenges. However, if you suspect that supervisors may be the culprit, try casually asking them a few questions to gauge how they view things like near-miss reports.

These questions could include:

- What was the last near-miss that you discussed as a group?
- How willing do you think workers are to report near-misses?
- What do you think we can do to collect better safety data?
- How can we address near-misses more efficiently?
- What are the most common near-miss incidents you see? Why do you think that is?

Based on their responses, you'll discover how well they understand the importance of safety data, and whether they're leading their crews accordingly.





## **SUPERVISOR SAFETY CHALLENGE #6**

### SAFETY RULES

Any six year old can tell you that “Do as I say, not as I do” is not a compelling way to get someone to behave the way you want them to. Neither is “Because I said so”. It doesn’t matter how knowledgeable your supervisors are—if they don’t walk the walk, then there’s going to be trouble.

When a supervisor breaks a safety rule, takes a shortcut, displays a lax attitude or fails to demonstrate their personal commitment to safety, it gives workers permission to do the same. Plus, it increases the supervisor’s own risk of injury.

This problem is typically caused when supervisors:

- don’t understand how leaders set the tone via their actions,
- think they’re “safe enough” already and don’t need the safety rules, or
- don’t believe in the value of safety.

## **SUPERVISOR SAFETY CHALLENGE #6**

### **SAFETY RULES**

# CHALLENGE

It's fairly easy to tell when supervisors are setting a poor example. Generally, all you need to do is watch them in the workplace or pay attention to their attitude towards safety.

Figuring out why it's a problem—whether it's because they don't understand their roles as frontline leaders or they're generally negligent about safety protocols—requires a bit more work. Although your intuition is usually correct in such situations, it's worth taking a closer look at supervisors' actions and attitudes to confirm your suspicions, as it could affect how you address the issue.

No matter what the reason is for supervisors not following or enforcing safety rules, you need to do something about it right away.



## SIX SOLUTIONS

### TO CREATE SAFETY-MINDED SUPERVISORS

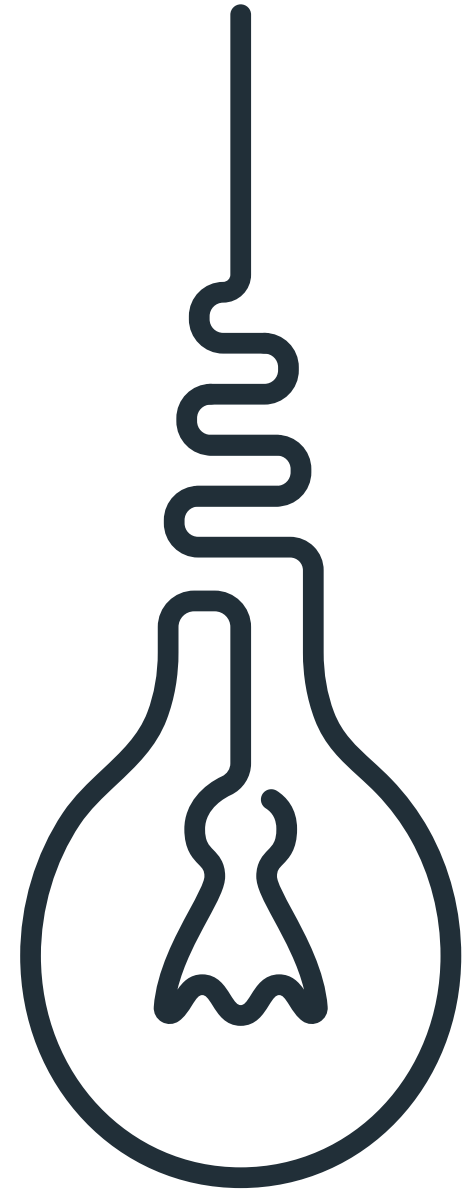
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Poor employee engagement, no buy-in from supervisors, a lack of knowledge, and weak communication skills—the challenges with supervisors are clear.

Fortunately, there's a solution for every problem. Here are six ways that safety executives can begin improving how supervisors approach safety issues:

- Direct coaching and mentorship
- Selling the value of safety
- Better engagement and a stronger sense of the big picture
- Education to fill knowledge gaps
- Formal communication training
- Oversight to encourage conversations

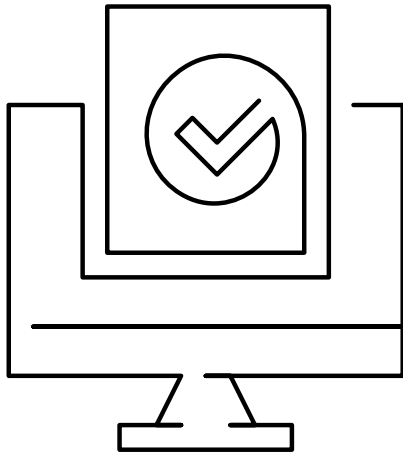
Depending on your exact situation, a combination of these solutions may be the best option. But no matter which supervisory challenges you face, try taking these avenues to ameliorate your frontline leaders' relationships with safety.



## SUPERVISOR SAFETY SOLUTION #1

### OFFER COACHING AND RESOURCES ON COMMUNICATION

# SOLUTION



Communication is a skill—and that’s both good news and bad news when it comes to frontline supervisors.

It’s bad news because it can’t be faked and if they don’t have the skill then they’re going to have a hard time successfully communicating with workers.

But it’s also good news because like any other skill it can be improved with practice. Just because they aren’t a good communicator today doesn’t mean they can’t become a better communicator tomorrow, or a great one in a few months. All it takes is training and practice, practice, practice.

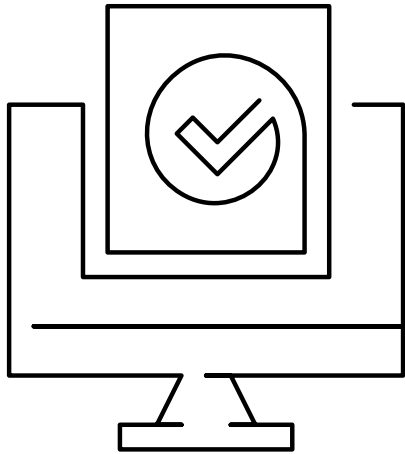
Supervisor-to-worker communication is all about skills, context and trust. Whether it’s a one-on-one discussion about a worker’s actions or a pre-shift meeting that will set the tone for the day, supervisors need to be able to quickly identify the lay of the land, use effective communication skills to get their message across, and have built up enough goodwill that workers are able to trust what the supervisor is saying.

Supervisors also need the tactical skills necessary for effective conversations, like knowing how to speak successfully to a group of people and/or how to use a positive tone to better engage with workers. They’re not going to wake up one day with those skills, but you can help them develop their communication competencies by offering them several types of support.



## SUPERVISOR SAFETY SOLUTION #1

### OFFER COACHING AND RESOURCES ON COMMUNICATION



#### **Provide Handouts and Resources**

The most low-effort way to encourage skills development is to offer resources that can guide supervisors through this process. This solution works best if there are only one or two problem areas that you'd like them to improve upon. For example, if supervisors' pre-shift meetings and safety talks aren't up to snuff then give them a copy of the 15 Tips to Improve Your Toolbox Talks guide (available for free at [safestart.com/guides/toolbox](https://safestart.com/guides/toolbox)).

Be cautious though, as this only works if the supervisors already know their skills are lacking. Otherwise, they could find it insulting if you hand them a printout on public speaking when they think they're doing just fine at it.

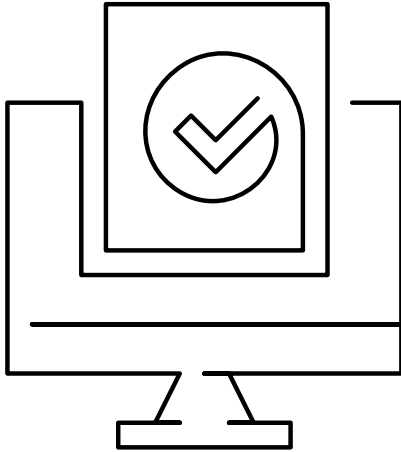
#### **Offer Coaching and Mentorship**

Teaching someone how to be a better communicator may sound like a lot of work—and it is. But the payoff can be absolutely enormous. There's simply no faster way for someone to develop a skill than through directed, hands-on learning. As an additional benefit, dedicating time to honing supervisors' skills can show commitment to the supervisor and may send engagement levels soaring.

Begin by establishing a need and a shared purpose: helping the supervisor become a stronger communicator so that they can better relay safety messages. From there, identify where the supervisor needs help, whether it's exuding presence and authority, having difficult conversations or talking engagingly about safety issues to their entire team. Then offer them mentorship on their specific issues. Allow them to talk about past struggles, mental roadblocks and other challenges they have.

## SUPERVISOR SAFETY SOLUTION #1

### OFFER COACHING AND RESOURCES ON COMMUNICATION



Start diving into specific communication skills, from making eye contact and enunciating clearly to larger concepts like using storytelling to engage an audience. Share your own experiences, provide concrete examples of when and where each skill is used, and explain why it's so useful. Offer time for them to practice, and plenty of room for them to fail. Stay positive, gently correct missteps, and keep the goal front and center: better safety through better communication.

Coaching and mentorship is also by far the best way for you to help supervisors improve their ability to determine the context for any given situation. By learning how to “read the room”, they’ll get better at tailoring how they talk to the situation at hand, which is a must-have skill for any effective communicator.

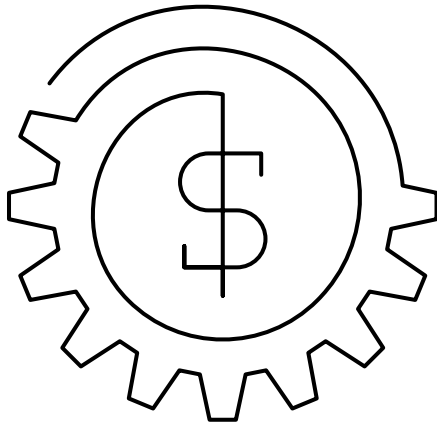
#### **Give Motivation and Support**

Connect the dots between new communication skills and a better future state—like feeling more confident, garnering more respect from their subordinates and peers, and potentially earning more money because they’re better at their job.

Keep in mind that skills development doesn’t happen overnight. Supervisors will need lots of support, encouragement, check-ins, and motivation as they travel the long road to building better communication skills.

## SUPERVISOR SAFETY SOLUTION #2

### START SELLING SAFETY



Safety professionals are incredibly hardworking by nature—but they can only do so much on their own. Sometimes the best course of action is to spend money to train and educate supervisors on safety and communication.

Easier said than done. In most cases, purchasing training requires you to get others in your company to throw their weight behind the initiative in order to justify the expense.

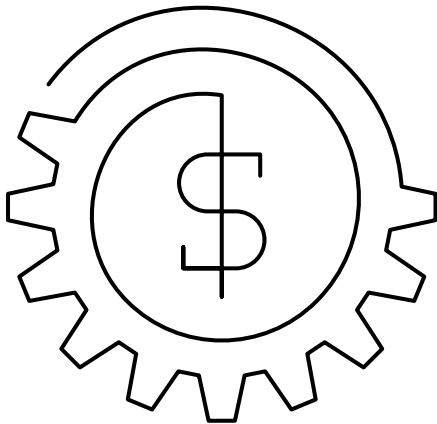
Start by **selling yourself on the idea** of investing a significant amount of time and budget on supervisor development. Look at your top safety challenges and ask yourself how many could be improved by supervisors better understanding safety and being able to more effectively communicate with their staff about it. When surveyed by EHS Daily Advisor,<sup>3</sup> safety professionals indicated the following were their top challenges:

- Employee engagement
- Employees taking shortcuts or ignoring rules
- Lack of supervisor participation in safety
- Slips, trips and falls
- A lackluster safety culture
- Clashes between safety and production

## SUPERVISOR SAFETY SOLUTION #2

### START SELLING SAFETY

# SOLUTION



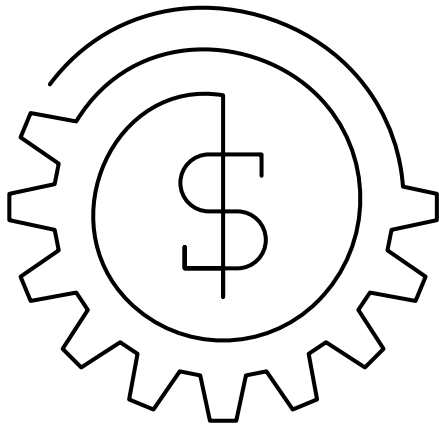
Every single one of these issues is directly contingent on a supervisor's ability to understand and communicate effectively about safety on a daily basis. Solving six problems with one solution? Certainly worthy of a significant amount of effort.

**Make friends** in the organization by asking them what their top challenges are. Listen or prompt them about employee engagement, culture and communication, and highlight how those are your challenges as well—and how the road to resolving them leads straight to frontline supervisors.

**Show the cost of inaction** by reminding executives about your company's workers' compensation costs. You could also outline the cost of serious injuries that are likely to occur in the near future but that may be prevented if supervisors had stronger communication skills and more safety knowledge. Once you attach a dollar figure to doing nothing and others see how expensive the status quo is, they'll be much more likely to consider spending money now in order to spend less on injury claims down the road. OSHA has an injury cost calculator and the National Safety Council's Injury Facts summarizes the average cost of major incidents.

## SUPERVISOR SAFETY SOLUTION #2

### START SELLING SAFETY



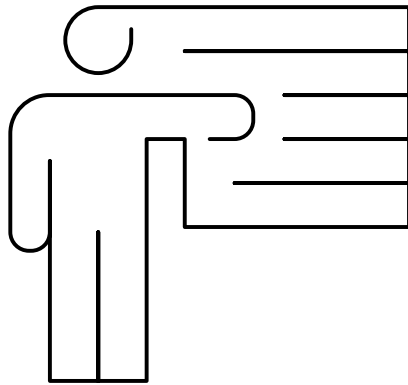
**Bring in the experts** to do the “selling” for you. You know it’s hard to get a budget for safety initiatives that aren’t required by OSHA. It often takes organizational alignment supported by data about your current state and desired future state of operations. A consultative approach and an unbiased third-party can provide you with the support you need to secure a formal investment in your supervisors. Ask potential training vendors to provide you with relevant materials or to help you build the case for supervisor training.

**Be patient but persistent** as you sell the value of training for supervisors. It can take a great deal of time to bring all the key stakeholders on board with the idea of improving safety via supervisory skills. Talk about the idea often (without sounding like a broken record) and focus on making incremental gains—getting the director of operations to talk to a potential vendor for an hour, or having the plant manager agree with you on the connection between supervisor performance and safety results. Keep supervisor training on the organizational agenda as much as possible and, at some point, you may find that suddenly, a consensus will form.

## SUPERVISOR SAFETY SOLUTION #3

### FOCUS ON ENGAGEMENT AND THE BIG PICTURE OF SAFETY

# SOLUTION



When people are engaged in their work, they get more done and their work tends to be of higher quality. On the issue of safety, an engaged supervisor will do a better job of managing EHS issues related to their team. This means it's worthwhile for safety managers to use proven engagement tactics to get supervisors onside with safety.

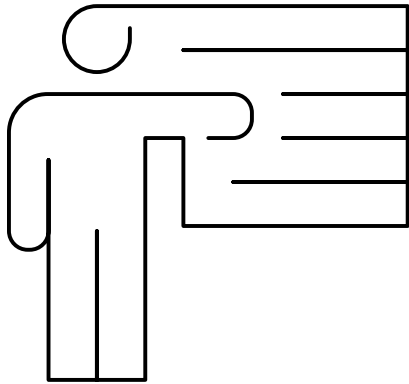
Start with casual one-on-one conversations and check-ins with supervisors. Build a rapport with them and establish what their current perspective is on safety. From there, you can begin using the following four elements to get them more engaged in the value of safety.

#### **Meaning**

Help frontline leaders see the direct impact they have on the health and safety of the people they supervise. Guide your supervisors through the reasons why safety is so important, from the moral imperative to save lives to the extended benefits of protecting the livelihood of every worker's family and building stronger communities by keeping its members healthy. Shifting a supervisor's viewpoint so that they see themselves as protectors of the community can be transformational.

## SUPERVISOR SAFETY SOLUTION #3

### FOCUS ON ENGAGEMENT AND THE BIG PICTURE OF SAFETY



#### Recognition and Praise

Offer supportive feedback, encouragement, and say “thank you.” This will help supervisors know when they’re performing well and it will make them feel valued. It will also reinforce the behavior you want from them, and increase the likelihood that they’ll continue to do it in the future. But any recognition has to be genuine and specific—instead of saying “good job,” which can come off as generic and meaningless, say “you did a great job of reminding workers about that hazard in your pre-shift meeting.”

#### Communication

Talk to supervisors like they’re peers, not subordinates. Recognize that they have a valuable ground-floor perspective and treat them accordingly. This means listening as much as you speak, avoiding lecturing, using open-ended questions (i.e., questions that can’t be answered in just one or two words), and asking for feedback and suggestions. It’s worth the effort, as research suggests that employees who feel heard are 4.6 times more likely to be empowered to perform their best work.<sup>4</sup>

#### Respect

Above all, treat supervisors with respect and avoid condescending behavior. You need your relationship to be a partnership, so treat it as such. If you show them respect, you have a much greater chance of earning their trust.



LEARN MORE

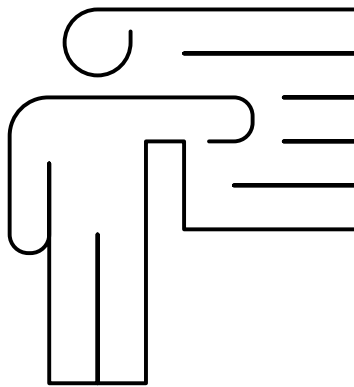
To learn more about increasing personal engagement for supervisors, check out our guide at:

**safestart.  
com/guides/  
engagement**

## SUPERVISOR SAFETY SOLUTION #3

### FOCUS ON ENGAGEMENT AND THE BIG PICTURE OF SAFETY

# SOLUTION



#### **Connect Supervisors with the Big Picture**

If supervisors feel connected to the larger picture of safety they'll take the extra steps to support organization-wide safety efforts and not just those that affect their crew.

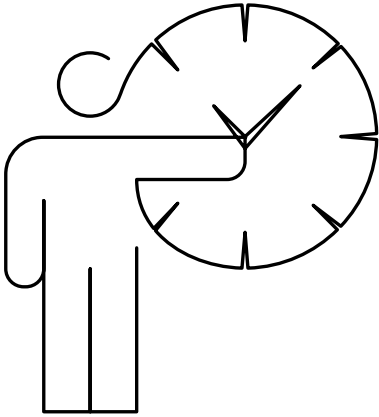
For example, if supervisors know what happens with near-miss reports once they've been collected—and can see everything that hinges on a large sample of accurate data—then they're more likely to make sure that their team properly fills out these reports to benefit them and the entire company. To this end, show your supervisors what happens with near-miss reports and other employee feedback, from how the information is aggregated to how decisions are made based on the data.

As supervisors begin encouraging workers to report near-misses and other safety-related incidents, take it a step further and begin talking to the supervisors about barriers to reporting in the workplace. Frontline leaders are in an ideal position to notice small day-to-day issues that could depress the number of safety-related reports that are submitted. You'll also be asking them to carry out a relatively advanced task that requires them to rely on their knowledge, insight and judgment—which demonstrates a great deal of respect and confidence in their abilities, boosting engagement as a result.



## **SUPERVISOR SAFETY SOLUTION #4**

### INCREASE THEIR SAFETY KNOW-HOW (ESPECIALLY ON HUMAN FACTORS)



OSHA states that safety should be a core function of every frontline leader's job. But in many cases, a supervisor's level of safety knowledge falls short of where it should be.

Supervisors should have a working knowledge of three fundamental areas:

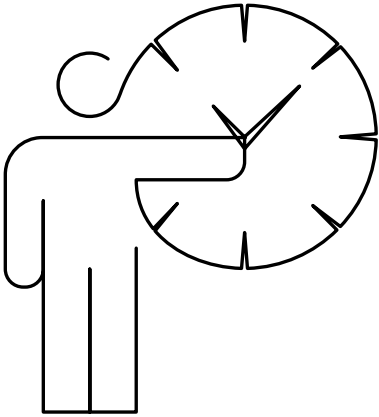
- Basic safety knowledge, like the hierarchy of controls
- Advanced safety knowledge, like how work systems can influence safety-related behaviors
- Human factors, like fatigue, distraction and uncertainty

If supervisors are lacking crucial safety knowledge, then EHS professionals have two choices: find a way to implement (or re-implement) proper safety training or roll up their sleeves and start educating supervisors on an informal basis.

## SUPERVISOR SAFETY SOLUTION #4

INCREASE THEIR SAFETY KNOW-HOW (ESPECIALLY ON HUMAN FACTORS)

# SOLUTION



### Formal Training

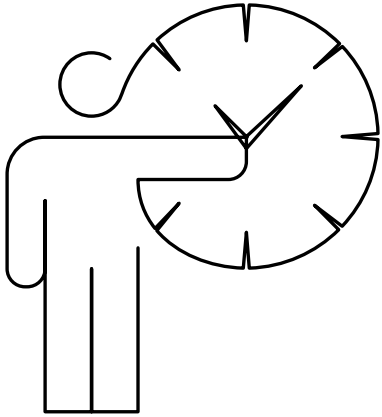
If there's a large gap in safety knowledge among supervisors, addressing the issue may require formal educational intervention—something that starts from square one and builds from there. If there are multiple areas that require attention, supervisors may learn more if your organization hires different vendors for each of the three areas of knowledge, rather than relying on a single Swiss-Army-knife training plan.

There's also one giant caveat to the need for classroom training: supervisors need to know about the issues they're trained on, but they also need to know how to address them on a daily basis. This means that after learning about things like human factors, supervisors need to be coached on how to spot them in the workplace—and how to respond successfully.

Keep in mind that a big part of seeing and responding to safety issues is the ability to talk about them to workers. Because in most cases, after a safety concern is spotted, some sort of intervention will be required, whether it's informing workers about a hazard that's just appeared (and doing so in a way that will get them to take it seriously) or putting a stop to potentially dangerous behavior (which often requires having a difficult but constructive conversation).

## SUPERVISOR SAFETY SOLUTION #4

### INCREASE THEIR SAFETY KNOW-HOW (ESPECIALLY ON HUMAN FACTORS)



#### **Informal Training**

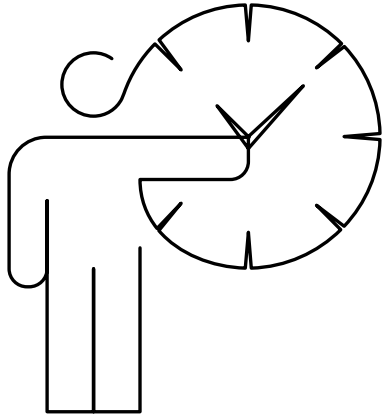
In some organizations, supervisors have a solid foundation of knowledge but key pieces of information have been forgotten (or were never quite fully learned the first time). In those situations—as well as in instances when your company won't spring for the cost of classroom learning—less formal educational opportunities can do the trick.

Informal teaching is often most effectively done through a series of short conversations, so recognize that it may take a while. Some organizations may provide the option for you to gather small groups of supervisors together for short learning sessions, but chances are good that you'll be required to teach supervisors one at a time through discussions on the shop floor or in the break room.

# SOLUTION

## SUPERVISOR SAFETY SOLUTION #4

### INCREASE THEIR SAFETY KNOW-HOW (ESPECIALLY ON HUMAN FACTORS)



Kick things off by establishing a shared purpose. (The engagement tips from Solution #3 may come in handy here.) Whether it's taking pride at being better at their job, saving more lives or learning for its own sake, provide the supervisors with some motivation to pay attention to what you have to say.

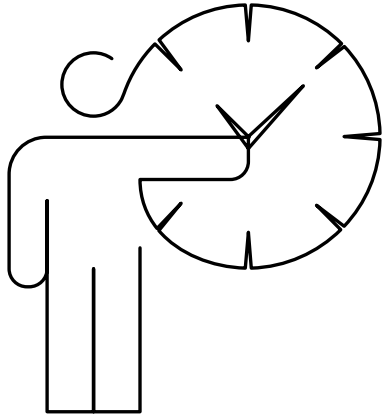
Make a clear map of the topics that you want to teach them about. Then, make a list of subtopics and organize them in the order that's most vital to improving safety.

In most cases, you'll likely only have time for five-minute chats when things are slow, or at the start or end of the shift. You won't have time to give a lecture on the history of fall-arrest harness regulations, but you will be able to talk about states like rushing that could cause workers to misuse their harness or ignore that blind spot when they're driving a forklift.

Now comes the fun part: teaching. Every situation is going to be different, so you'll have to adjust your approach based on the enthusiasm of the person you're talking to, the time you have available and the specific topic you're teaching.

## **SUPERVISOR SAFETY SOLUTION #4**

### INCREASE THEIR SAFETY KNOW-HOW (ESPECIALLY ON HUMAN FACTORS)



Make sure the supervisors are clear on what you're trying to teach them before you move on to another subject. But steer clear of sudden trick questions— you don't want to make them feel like they're taking an exam. You can test their knowledge and understanding by asking some follow-up questions or asking for their take on the issue.

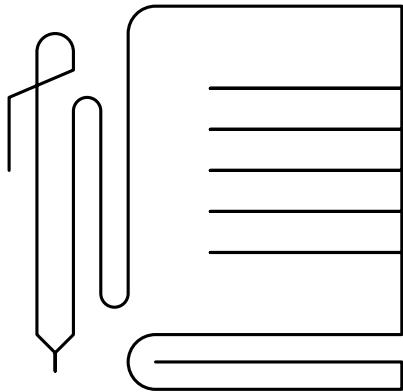
Asking for their opinion shows respect for their experience and perspective, and ensures continued engagement in this form of education. Simply talking “at” them is not going to cut it.

However, you may find success in having regular chats in which you ask for the supervisor's take on something, then share your own stories and experiences regarding the same issue.

## SUPERVISOR SAFETY SOLUTION #5

### FORMAL COMMUNICATIONS TRAINING

# SOLUTION



As Abraham Maslow said, “I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail.” If your supervisors spend more time acting like drill sergeants than they do as leaders, then it’s likely that they have an empty communications toolbox.

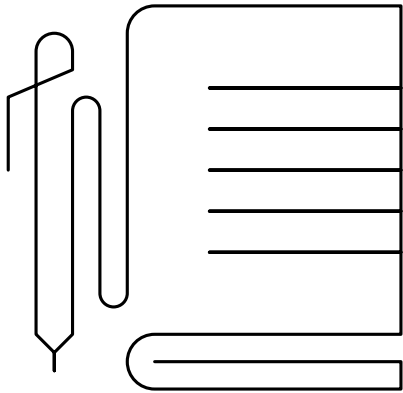
You may also have supervisors who stammer or mumble their way through toolbox talks or safety meetings. No matter how skilled they are in other areas, these poor communication skills are a major drag on their efficacy as frontline leaders.

It’s up to the organization to provide supervisors with a wider range of communication and coaching tools, such as stronger conversation skills, the ability to build trust, and the knowledge of how to engage workers with storytelling and other techniques. That way, when your supervisors notice a safety violation, they will be able to deal with the situation in a constructive manner instead of going around whacking people with a metaphorical hammer.

The three most popular types of communication training for supervisors are educational sessions run by an in-house expert, consultant-led training and training developed by a vendor.

## SUPERVISOR SAFETY SOLUTION #5

### FORMAL COMMUNICATIONS TRAINING



When it comes to communication skills development, an outside perspective can often be beneficial. It can disrupt the supervisor's complacency and help overcome built-in biases. In many cases, consultants and vendors may have more expertise in communication pedagogy than your in-house options.

However, it's also possible to do it yourself. If you decide to take the DIY route, identify specific communication skills and techniques and focus your training on developing and practicing them until they become ingrained. Research from Oxford University suggests that context-dependent repetition is the most important element in behavioral change interventions.<sup>5</sup> It may be better for you to help supervisors develop one or two skills until they reach habit strength, rather than try to impart a suite of communication strategies that will ultimately fail to stick.

Communication skills training doesn't have to be specific to safety, because it's a transferable skill and any improvements will spill over into safety discussions. But it may be the fastest route to better toolbox talks and more positive—and effective—safety interventions.

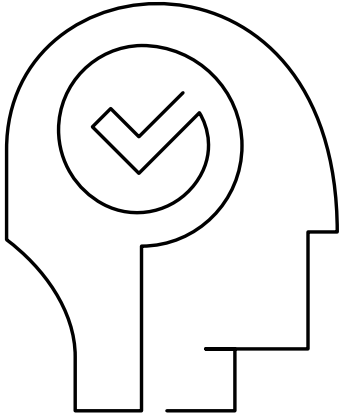
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<sup>5</sup>Gardner and Rebar, "Habit Formation and Behaviour Change", Oxford Research Encyclopedia, April 2019.

## SUPERVISOR SAFETY SOLUTION #6

### PROVIDE MORE OVERSIGHT

# SOLUTION



There's an old saying that what gets measured gets done. This is certainly true when it comes to safety. If your supervisors don't talk about safety enough, or your workers aren't filling out a sufficient number of near-miss reports, then it may be time to tell your supervisors that you'll be paying more attention to the volume of safety interactions that happen and near misses that get reported.

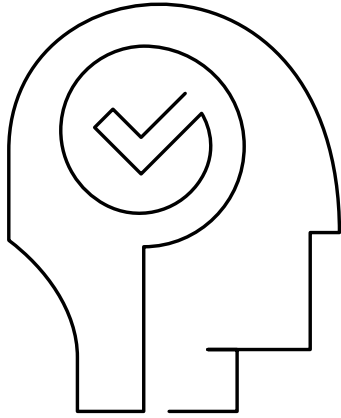
Begin by ensuring that supervisors understand why it's so essential to be talking about safety all the time—the more safety is discussed, the more likely it is to be top of mind for workers. (Alternatively, you can hire a consultant or conduct training that will get supervisor buy-in on the need for frequent safety conversations.)

Then, ask supervisors to start logging their safety chats. Depending on the scope of the challenge in your workplace (and other worksite-specific details, such as the nature of the jobs being performed), you may want to ask supervisors to simply tally how often they bring up safety. Or you may want to ask them to create separate records of their group safety conversations, one-on-one chats, and direct interventions or reminders.



## **SUPERVISOR SAFETY SOLUTION #6**

### PROVIDE MORE OVERSIGHT



Self-reporting can be unreliable, but by asking supervisors to write down a few details about each conversation, or even just a few sentences at the end of their shift to summarize the overall arc of their safety discussions, they will be more accountable for their safety discussions. This will provide two benefits. First, it will be obvious which narratives are accurate. Second, it will help supervisors reflect on the quality of their conversations and lead them to naturally make their own adjustments.

It's important to regularly remind supervisors that you expect them to be talking about safety on a consistent basis and that you'll be monitoring their progress. If you have a large group of supervisors, publicly laud the ones who are doing well and avoid chastising poor performers—as with frontline workers, supervisors are more likely to do what you want if you establish a positive, growth-oriented atmosphere.

You can also start publicly discussing the volume of safety incidents that are being reported. Make it clear that you're watching the number of reports that are being submitted, and whose teams are doing the submitting. Keep things positive by praising supervisors who are doing a decent job of getting more—or more accurate—reports submitted.

It can be useful to get the supervisors' managers on board. Help the managers understand the importance of safety reporting to the organization, and to their specific areas of responsibility. Then ask the manager to check in on safety reporting and conversations in every meeting with frontline supervisors. When supervisors see that their boss expects them to be talking about safety and guiding workers to submit more reports, then they'll be more motivated to better attend to safety.

## THREE THINGS EVERY SUPERVISOR NEEDS— AND THREE WAYS YOU CAN PROVIDE IT FOR THEM

The six problems discussed in this guide are the most common challenges when it comes to supervisors and safety—but they're by no means the only ones. Some workplaces will have different issues altogether, while others may experience several of these challenges at once.

In the end, though, many supervisor-related challenges can be resolved, or at least mitigated, by providing them with three things: communication skills, knowledge, and support.

# 3

## 1 **Communication Skills**

Supervisors need to communicate effectively in order to help employees with safety issues. When supervisors are more relatable and better at talking about safety, they are more likely to successfully intervene when there's a safety problem. They'll also be able to coach workers to help them avoid at-risk behavior in the first place.

To make that happen, supervisors need to learn the ins and outs of effective conversations—what to say, when to say it, how to say it, and why. They also need lots of context-specific practice to help them solidify their new skills. Note that learning will be quickest with a coach offering positive corrections whenever the supervisor makes a misstep or a conversation starts to go sideways.

## THREE THINGS EVERY SUPERVISOR NEEDS— AND THREE WAYS YOU CAN PROVIDE IT FOR THEM

# 3

### 2 Knowledge

Supervisors can only talk to workers about things they know about. If they aren't aware of dangerous hazards or human factors like distraction or fatigue then they can't help workers navigate them. And if they don't know how human factors interact with organizational systems then they can't help the company fix gaps in its processes and procedures.

As with communication skills, it's important for supervisors to learn how to put their knowledge to use. The ability to spot human factors in the workplace is an incredibly valuable skill for every supervisor to have. To get there, supervisors need education about human factors, and then they need someone to walk with them through their work areas to help them get accustomed to recognizing and responding to these factors.

### 3 Support

Supervisors don't spontaneously develop stronger communication skills. And they won't wake up one day and suddenly possess more safety knowledge.

They need organizational help to improve skills and learn more about safety—and then they need support from the safety manager and other company leaders as they establish their new skills and knowledge through practice and repetition.

This guide has outlined six of the most common solutions to supervisory challenges. But when you boil them down, there are three major avenues for safety professionals to deliver the skills, knowledge and support that supervisors need.

## THREE THINGS EVERY SUPERVISOR NEEDS— AND THREE WAYS YOU CAN PROVIDE IT FOR THEM

# 3

### 1 Engagement

Engaged supervisors are more likely to engage their employees. Culture and engagement tend to trickle down through an organizational hierarchy. Offer supervisors respect and recognition and there's a decent chance they'll do the same for employees.

### 2 Coaching and Mentorship

Becoming a supervisor doesn't automatically come with leadership and communication skills. Offering coaching and mentorship to supervisors may be the most direct route to imparting the wisdom and abilities that your frontline leaders need to succeed.

### 3 Outside Intervention

There's a wide variety of outside interventions that safety managers can take, from bringing in a freelance safety consultant to hiring vendors that specializes in communications training. But the most effective option, and often the most affordable in the long run, is comprehensive training that weaves both communication and safety education together. Ideally, it should also offer the ability to solidify new skills and knowledge through curated opportunities to practice.

## THREE THINGS EVERY SUPERVISOR NEEDS— IT'S TIME TO GET STARTED

Your supervisors aren't going to improve on their own. And there may not be anyone else in your organization that will care as much as you do about teaching supervisors how to have a bigger impact on safety.

Communication and safety skills go hand in hand. As this guide has shown, there's plenty that can be done to boost your supervisors' abilities. Now it's up to you to get the ball rolling on supervisory safety training.



## WE HOPE THAT YOU FOUND THIS GUIDE HELPFUL.

FOR MORE INSIGHT INTO A VARIETY OF SAFETY PROBLEMS—AND THEIR POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS—CHECK OUT OUR COLLECTION OF ON-DEMAND WEBINARS:

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SafeStart is a safety company dedicated to reducing preventable deaths and injuries both on and off the job by making human factors more understandable, safety training more personable, and giving organizations around the world a more engaging and useful approach to keeping people safe.



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