

Ensuring Accountability at All Levels

Construction companies in partnership with workers are responsible for ensuring that jobsite hazards are eliminated or at least minimized. These partnerships are most effective when they exist within a positive safety climate.

The **safety climate** on a specific construction project refers to managements’ and workers’ shared perceptions of the adequacy of the safety and health programs and the consistency between the organization’s espoused safety policies/procedures and the actual conditions at the jobsite. It is the combination of safety climates from multiple organizations including the project owner, construction manager/general contractor, and subcontractors and it may be influenced by local conditions such as project delivery, scheduling, planning methods and existing norms amongst involved trades.

A positive and effective safety climate cannot exist without accountability throughout an organization. Everyone involved in a construction project should be held accountable for safety, including owners, management, safety personnel, supervisors, and workers. Specific responsibilities for implementing safety need to be clearly defined at all levels by role, and communicated and reinforced throughout the organization regularly. Which of the following best describes your company?

| UNINFORMED | → REACTIVE | → COMPLIANT | → PROACTIVE | → EXEMPLARY |
|--|---|--|---|---|
| There is no formal safety training provided to workers, supervisors, or managers. Expectations are not clearly articulated. Workers are the only ones held accountable for safety performance. Management performance reviews do not include safety metrics. Bonuses are based on the number of reported injuries, which discourages reporting. Investigations into incidents or close calls result in punitive action toward employees. There are no written safety or health policies. | Workers are automatically punished (e.g., fined or fired) for poor safety performance. Poor project safety performance carries few consequences for supervisors. Safety goals are not established and metrics are not gathered prospectively or used to evaluate performance. | Established safety goals are based only on OSHA guidelines. Company collects injury and illness data, but they are not shared with supervisors or workers. Incident investigations are conducted but not in a “blame free” manner. | Safety goals go above and beyond OSHA guidelines to structure supervisor performance evaluations and ensure continuous improvement. All employees are recognized and sometimes rewarded for identifying hazards, reporting close calls, creating safety solutions and for superior safety performance. Incident investigations result in positive outcomes driving improvement. | Safety commitment and expectations are consistently communicated across the company, and to all business partners. Everyone is recognized and included in safety awards based on leading vs. lagging indicators. Supervisor and worker performance evaluations are based on leading and lagging safety indicators. Safety metrics are benchmarked against other companies and used for internal continuous quality improvement. Safety performance is a primary factor in hiring managers and subcontractors, and for promotions. All members of a project team are responsible for safety activities. Incident investigations result in positive outcomes driving improvement. Lessons learned are shared. |

How to become exemplary

Review the ideas below and check the short-term , mid-term , or long-term  circle to indicate which you will commit to adopt and by when. *Congratulations, if you’ve already adopted the idea!*

Idea 1—Create an incentive structure that promotes and rewards safety processes not just outcomes

Companies may create a disincentive to report incidents if workers, supervisors and crews are rewarded for achieving a low recordable injury rate. This can send mixed messages about the degree to which safety really is valued compared to productivity and other organizational requirements. These types of mixed messages can lead to confusion and damage the mutual trust between workers and management necessary to achieve a positive safety climate. A better approach is to recognize and reward employees for identifying, reporting, and even mitigating hazards. Management could implement an on-line incident reporting system so they can be notified when an incident or close call is reported. Make sure all on-site personnel can access it so barriers aren’t created. An “action list” could be created and placed in a prominent place showing how issues raised by workers are being addressed, and who was rewarded for identifying the hazard. This creates a climate that reinforces the notion that workers’ contributions for implementing safety are valued.

-  — Already Adopted
-  — Short-term
-  — Mid-term
-  — Long-term

Idea 2—Develop, distribute, and implement written safety policies to form the foundation of a strong safety climate

Written safety policies should clearly describe expectations, roles, and responsibilities for establishing and maintaining a positive jobsite safety climate. The policies should come from and be signed by the CEO. The policies should be disseminated to and reviewed with all employees, incorporated into the organization’s safety manual, and be reinforced verbally on a day-to-day basis through various task planning discussions.

-  Already Adopted
-  Short-term
-  Mid-term
-  Long-term

Idea 3—Conduct blame-free incident investigations

Cursory investigations of incident occurrences that seek to blame rather than learn, hamper the development of a positive safety climate and the free flow of information. Such investigations can generate a climate of fear among workers that often leads to under- or non-reporting of potential hazards, close calls, and injuries. While underreporting may improve a company’s safety record, it does not lead to a stronger safety climate and indeed might weaken it. Front-line supervisors need training on how to conduct blame-free incident and close call investigations. Investigations should use root-cause analyses to examine the environmental, organizational, and human factors contributing to these incidents, and mechanisms must be put in place to share findings throughout the organization.

-  Already Adopted
-  Short-term
-  Mid-term
-  Long-term

Idea 4—Incorporate safety leadership into supervisor evaluations

A supervisor’s annual performance evaluation should emphasize his/her leadership skills with respect to safety. A competency rubric (like the one above) could be developed that lays out the expectations for poor to superior performance. The rubric would contain leadership behaviors such as the supervisor’s ability to empower workers to identify hazards and stop work if necessary, report incidents, and participate in blame-free incident investigations. The rubric-based evaluation data can be gathered by asking workers directly about on-site safety leadership and by observational methods. Strengths and shortcomings identified in the evaluation are discussed with supervisors and improvement goals are established.

-  Already Adopted
-  Short-term
-  Mid-term
-  Long-term

Idea 5—Owners should also be accountable for safety

One method for making owners accountable for safety is by having them adopt Owner-Controlled Insurance Programs (OCIPs). An OCIP is a self-insurance program where owners pay out-of-pocket for health care and lost-time costs, giving them a visible financial stake in maintaining safety on their sites. Rather than each contractor and subcontractor purchasing insurance (including Workers’ Compensation) separately and charging the owner, in an OCIP the owner purchases the insurance for all parties on the site and thus has a financial incentive to proactively address hazards before an incident occurs.

-  Already Adopted
-  Short-term
-  Mid-term
-  Long-term