

Improving Supervisory Leadership

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.

Supervisors have the authority and ability to make changes and correct hazards on the jobsite. Therefore, how they lead, act as role models, and communicate are probably the most important factors in determining the degree to which a strong positive project safety climate is achieved. The organization’s expectations are key to shaping supervisors’ safety-related attitudes and behaviors. Which of the following best describes your company?

UNINFORMED	→ REACTIVE	→ COMPLIANT	→ PROACTIVE	→ EXEMPLARY
There is no safety-related vision or leadership. Supervisors have no supervisory training and have little understanding or knowledge of regulatory requirements. Supervisors manage and punish using intimidation and the focus is only on individual behavior without taking the process into account. Supervisors play the blame game when an incident occurs instead of performing root-cause analysis. There is no system of accountability or it is not applied evenly. The focus is on production.	Supervisors ignore crew input regarding potential hazards and close calls. They focus on individual behaviors as a foundation for safety, and do not consider underlying factors that can impact safety conditions. The organization becomes concerned with safety and the supervisor’s leadership skills only after an incident occurs or regulatory action is taken.	Supervisors follow OSHA regulations. The organization provides or requires training to meet regulatory guidelines.	Supervisors participate in and initiate safety program activities that are focused on continuous improvement. Supervisors seek advice from and use worker input to improve site safety.	Supervisors are provided with and required to take training in safety communication, motivation, and preplanning. Supervisors are required to attain a Safety Trained Supervisor (STS) credential. As a result, supervisors display a personal vision for, and a deep commitment to, creating a strong, positive project safety climate. They inspire and motivate workers to share that same commitment. They establish clear safety-related roles and responsibilities, make safety a major component of all meetings and instill a sense of safety ownership at all levels. Supervisors are effective communicators, excellent role models for safety, and are able to coach and teach safety to their crew.

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—Supervisors are well-trained, not just on hazards, but also on leadership skills

For most people, leadership skills are not innate; they must be learned through education, training, and experience. Below are 4 aspects of a true leader. While one wouldn’t necessarily be trained separately on each of these, you can use the scale to evaluate where your supervisors are currently and prioritize areas that need more work.

1a. Leads by Example – Is a role model for safety - “Walks the Talk”

Crews are constantly observing the supervisor’s safety-related attitudes and behaviors to learn what the safety-related expectations are on the jobsite. Supervisors who learn the skills to lead by example are able to demonstrate through their words and actions that safety is valued. Consistency is key. Supervisors who are inconsistent with their message that safety is never compromised will reinforce worker’s perceptions that productivity trumps safety, and that it’s ok to cut corners, to wear PPE only 80% of the time, ok not to report a close call, or ok to not stop work when they identify a hazard. Supervisors who consistently send and demonstrate pro-safety messages can expect more positive outcomes.

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

1b. Encourages Innovation

Exemplary companies expect their supervisors to communicate with their crew members, not only about work but also about hazard identification. This can be done during daily pre-task planning meetings where the supervisor and crew talk about the work to be done that day and cooperatively identify the potential safety problems, along with ideas on how to control them. This creates a climate where workers, who are exposed to the risk more than anybody else and probably have thought of good practical solutions, don't feel foolish coming forward with their ideas. Depending on the complexity of the solution, the company can reward the worker(s) with a cash bonus for their solution.

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

1c. Is a Coach

A supervisor with good coaching skills creates safety goals in partnership with the crew members, and helps them achieve those goals by removing barriers and providing feedback when things are going well, but also when things need to be improved. The ability to provide constructive feedback is essential. It may not come naturally, but it is a skill that can be learned. There are 3 steps for providing constructive feedback. First, provide context by telling workers exactly what was observed. Then, explain why it was healthy or risky and what outcome might result if the activity continues. Finally, end the conversation with a goal and a plan for making changes (if needed) using worker input and suggestions. Feedback should be given frequently and in a timely manner. Remember that goals should be in line with the overall expectations of the safety management system and should drive the continuous improvement process.

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

1d. Motivates Others

Supervisory leaders motivate their crew by empowering them to participate in their own and each other's safety. Supervisors must ensure everyone understands there are certain expectations, obligations, and opportunities for everyone. These include: attending and providing input at daily pre-task planning meetings, taking all required safety training, using information learned, stopping work and notifying leads or supervisor when hazards are identified, and reporting all close calls and incidents. Trust is gained when supervisors listen and take seriously input from their crew and involve them in implementing suggestions. It is also critical that when an incident occurs, supervisors and crew members work as partners to conduct a blame-free root-cause analysis. Together they can identify lessons learned and make plans to reduce the risk that the incident will occur again.

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

Idea 2—Performance evaluations focus primarily on being a good safety leader

A supervisor's annual performance evaluation should emphasize his/her leadership skills with respect to safety in addition to their contribution toward safety goals that were established at the beginning of the year. 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 described above. The rubric-based evaluation information can be gathered by asking the workers for input and also by direct observational methods. Management would discuss the strengths and shortcomings identified by the evaluation with the supervisors and together establish improvement goals, including additional leadership training.

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