

How to Deal With Employees of Different Generations

written by Rory Lodge | March 10, 2014



Question: I supervise a wide range of employees, from age 18 up to people well into their 60s. They have a variety of different attitudes toward safety, work and life. It's difficult to know how to deal with these different generations and create a solid safety culture. What advice would you have?

Answer: Human beings are flawed creatures and with or without leadership, we tend to drift a little in our health and safety targets. Couple this with the natural human reluctance to enforce safety initiatives and the norm shifts to a newer, slightly unsafe norm. Without conscious effort, this new norm can drift further, much like the Challenger disaster of 1986, which was blamed on the failure of a faulty O-ring that caused hot gases to burn through an external fuel tank, resulting in an explosion that killed the seven-member crew. NASA engineers had expressed concern about the O-ring situation before the January 1986 Challenger flight, yet it was allowed to proceed. The astronauts in the Challenger incident gave up their lives due to this very human tendency to drift and set new norms of behavior. That's why we set in place safety policies and procedures to use to compare our norms to and set benchmarks that don't drift due to inertia.

A one-size-fits-all approach in terms of motivating your employees to work safely—after all, I am their manager or supervisor and they have to listen to me—is sure to fail. A supervisor is like a conductor who must coach members of his or her “orchestra” differently, whether mentoring a grizzled baby boomer veteran or an up-and-coming Generation Y employee. Different generations respond differently and supervisors must take that into account when determining how to motivate and/or discipline a baby boomer or Generation Y employee.

A day off without pay to a baby boomer or Generation X employee is traumatic and discipline inducing, but a Generation Y employee might see it as a holiday. So, perhaps have your Generation Y employees create a work plan they have to follow each and every time they do a job and require them to stick to it. That may be a far more effective move in terms of motivation and/or discipline.

Not following up on something and acting decisively and promptly to provide measurable feedback to employees is another flawed behavior among many supervisors or managers. You need to follow through with behaviors you expect from your employees. For example, if an employee does something good, praise that person and give him or her recognition. People are starved for recognition and positive attention. Catching people doing something right and rewarding this behavior will foster more of the same positive behaviors.

However, if an employee's action is negative, such as working without required PPE, discipline should be swift and thorough. Explain the reasons for the rule that was broken and then customize the discipline to motivate that person to do better.

By counteracting these flaws, you'll go a long way toward creating a good health and safety culture, which may result in lives being saved, perhaps even yours!

Question answered by Barbara Semeniuk, a safety professional who heads Purcell Enterprises Ltd. (www.purcellenterprises.ca), a safety and loss management consulting firm operating in Canada and the United States.