Leading When the System Fails



Like most supervisors, you probably get frustrated when things go wrong, especially if you feel that your safety concerns are not being addressed by your company. But, as a supervisor, you're a leader and a custodian of your workers' safety. Workers take their cue from you. If you give off vibes of frustration, your workers will, too. So it's important to learn to keep your frustration and temporary disillusionment to yourself. Here's why.

Unequal Treatment Infects the Workplace

Consider the example of workers Tom, Dick and Harry who have received very stern punishments for committing the same safety violation. For the sake of argument, let's say they exposed themselves to a fall greater that 6 feet without fall protection. Their penalty: dismissal.

Now here come supervisors Bob, Rick and Larry. They each commit what looks and feels like a similar violation: climbing a ladder that's red-tagged. However, the powers-that-be do not interpret the transgression to be as serious. Accordingly, their punishment is less severe: a three-day suspension.

Pretty soon, word gets around. Your crew starts whispering amongst themselves about how Bob, Rick and Larry got special consideration because of their status. The rules, it seems, don't apply to everyone. Morale drops dramatically. You may even notice an attitude change among some of your co-workers who are responsible for safety. The chances of being accident-free decrease.

What You Must Not Do

Has this ever happened to you? This situation can be very tough to deal with. The absolute worst thing you can do under these circumstances is to take sides against the company and vent outrage and what you perceive as the hypocrisy of the system. This is true even if you feel that an injustice *was* done.

It is in moments like these that you must demonstrate your passion for safety, confidence in your efforts and faith in the system. It's not simply your own sanity at stake. Leadership demands that you send the appropriate message to your workers. Never forget for a second that workers are looking to you for answers and an example to follow.

What You Must Do

That's not to say that you can't feel disappointment or even outrage with the system.

But there’s a time and a place to express these feelings. Hopefully your company is structured in a way that enables you to handle the issue without repercussion.

Sound advice would be to meet with your workers and tell them simply that bad things sometimes happen to good people. Life is not always fair or as fair as you would like it to be. Most importantly, emphasize that the number one concern is, has been and always will be the safety of the worker. It is not about punishment; it is about making sure everyone goes home alive and well every single day.

Conclusion

There are easier and less stressful jobs than being a safety trainer and supervisor. But this is the field you’ve chosen. You therefore have a duty—to yourself and to those you protect—to find a way to make it work. And to do that, you must be prepared to handle controversy and perceived unfairness. That involves learning how to control your emotions in the interest of the greater good even in the face of circumstances that cause you to question the system you’re serving.