



NAC Executive Insights

Safety Culture Series

Recognition and Reward

Key Points

- A recognition and reward program is effective in motivating desired behaviors and outcomes.
- Recognition should be ongoing throughout the organization.
- Senior leaders should seek and leverage opportunities to recognize staff, especially during site visits.
- Rewards are more impactful when they are meaningful to the receiver.
- Ensure the recognition and reward program is fair and inclusive to avoid unintentional bias.
- Be aware of the potential detriments of overemphasis on the rewards part of the program.

Introduction

This Executive Insight describes how a recognition and reward program can be used as an effective tool to create and sustain an outstanding safety culture. Recognition is a verbal or written acknowledgement of appreciation while reward involves the receipt of an award to acknowledge the achievement. This Executive Insight describes the psychology behind an effective recognition and reward program and provides examples of how it can be used.

Why Adopt Recognition and Reward

The Executive Insight, "Introduction to the Safety Culture Series," provides oversight on and introduces the concept of safety culture, which is as an all-employee system of shared beliefs, practices, and attitudes that shapes behavior and dictates how all work is performed. Recognition and reward can play an effective role in motivating individuals to create and sustain this environment.

The psychology behind recognition and reward is rooted in reinforcement theory. This theory holds that a behavior can be strengthened when good events follow, and reduced when undesirable events follow. In other words, behavior is influenced by its consequences. It is intended to positively reinforce desired behaviors to motivate individuals to repeat that behavior. When an individual receives meaningful recognition or reward, it creates the added benefit of tapping into the pleasure centers of the brain, further stimulating a positive association with the desired behavior.

Effective use of recognition and reward motivates employees to reinforce positive behaviors. This underpins the desired safety culture to achieve sustained performance. The value created by recognition and reward includes:

- **Enhancing safety awareness:** Recognition and reward programs reinforce the importance of safety in the workplace, reminding employees to always prioritize it.
- **Motivating positive behavior:** By rewarding safe practices, employees are encouraged to adhere to safety protocols and guidelines.
- **Improving employee morale:** Recognition contributes to higher job satisfaction, which can lead to improved performance and reduced turnover.
- **Identifying safety champions:** Rewards can help identify employees who excel in safety and create role models within the organization.

Effective Ways to Recognize

Recognition can be accomplished either with effective written or oral communication. It is most impactful when directly speaking to an employee and in a public setting where the positive reinforcement is acknowledged by a large group. Key factors to make it most effective are:

1. Make it personal.
2. Make it timely.
3. Make sure it is clear and meaningful.

Recognition can be offered by anyone throughout the organization—it does not necessarily need to come from senior leadership. It can be done spontaneously when positive behavior is observed and immediately acknowledged and recognized by other team members.

One of the most impactful ways senior leaders can recognize staff is to observe actions deep down in the organization. This is best accomplished by conducting an office or site visit where the leader takes the time to monitor and engage with the front-line staff. There should be multiple opportunities for the leader to recognize individuals or teams when great safety behaviors are observed. Acknowledging accomplishments boosts morale and encourages continued excellence.

Rewards

In many cases, recognition may be sufficient to achieve the objective of reinforcing the desired behaviors. Reward, however, is an additional way to further incentivize the desired behavior.

Rewards can range in value, but the most crucial factor is that it be meaningful to the team or individual being recognized. Some examples include:

1. A meal
2. A gift voucher
3. Professional development/training opportunity
4. Safety gear or tools

5. Promotion or additional job responsibility
6. Cash award (from low amounts to high amounts)
7. CEO Coin
8. CEO Letter of Commendation
9. Medals
10. Plaque
11. Presentation of the award at company meetings
12. Announcement of the award in company publications

This program can be motivating to the individual or team receiving the reward, but risks are associated with a rewards program if not administered well, as discussed in the next section. Successful recognition and reward programs are characterized by clarity, fairness, and inclusiveness. Consistent implementation is required and the program must align with the organization's values. Regularly assess the effectiveness of the program and adapt to ensure it stays relevant and continues to effectively motivate the employees.

Potential Detriments

While safety recognition and reward programs can be effective in promoting a culture of safety, potential detriments or challenges are associated with them. Consider the following:

1. **Unintended consequences:** In some cases, employees might prioritize achieving recognition or rewards over the actual safety measures. This could result in a focus on superficial compliance rather than a genuine commitment to maintain a safe working environment.
2. **Peer pressure and competition:** If rewards are substantial, safety recognition programs can lead to employees not reporting safety concerns to maintain their position in the program.
3. **Inequity concerns:** If the criteria for safety recognition are not clear or if the program is perceived as unfair, it may lead to dissatisfaction among employees. This can create a negative workplace atmosphere and undermine the intended positive impacts of the program.
4. **Short-term focus:** Some employees might be motivated by short-term rewards rather than long-term safety goals. This can result in a lack of sustained commitment to safety practices once the novelty of the program wears off.
5. **Overemphasis on positive outcomes:** Focusing solely on rewarding positive outcomes may neglect the importance of learning from near misses or incidents. A balance must exist between recognizing successes and addressing areas for improvement.

Strategies for Overcoming Detriments

Overcoming potential detriments in safety recognition and rewards programs involves careful planning, implementation, and continuous evaluation. By taking a strategic and holistic approach, organizations can enhance the effectiveness of their programs while minimizing potential detriments.

The strategies described below are intended to address and mitigate the challenges associated with safety recognition and rewards programs:

- 1. Clear and transparent criteria:** Establish clear and transparent criteria for safety recognition. Ensure that employees understand how they can earn recognition and rewards as the organization's program promotes fairness and reduces ambiguity.
- 2. Balanced criteria:** Balance the measurement of safety performance by considering both leading indicators (proactive measures such as training attendance and safety audits) and lagging indicators (historical incident rates). Doing so provides a more comprehensive view of safety efforts.
- 3. Focus not only on the outcomes, but on behaviors:** Encourage and recognize safe behaviors, not just positive outcomes. This helps avoid situations where employees might compromise safety to achieve recognition.
- 4. Communication:** Maintain open and continuous communication about the purpose and benefits of the safety recognition program. Address any concerns or misconceptions. Solicit and respond to employee communications on methods to improve the program.
- 5. Inclusive programs:** Design programs that consider diverse roles within the organization. Avoid creating programs that only benefit specific groups or individuals, as this can lead to resentment among employees.
- 6. Recognize program limitations:** Recognition and reward programs are only a small part of establishing a safety culture. They do not take the place of all the other safety culture elements listed in the Executive Insight, "Introduction to the Safety Culture Series." An overemphasis on recognition and reward programs will be to the detriment of establishing a true safety culture.
- 7. Assess and adjust:** Regular assessments and adjustments based on employee feedback contribute to the ongoing success of these initiatives.

Conclusion

This Executive Insight describes the value of an effective recognition and rewards program. When implemented in a timely and fair manner, with consideration of potential detriments, such programs can be a big motivator to reinforce the desired behaviors to support building a great safety culture.

For Further Reading – Safety Culture Series (Executive Insights)

- [Introduction to the Safety Culture Series](#)
- [Safety Culture – Human Performance Principles](#)
- [Safety Culture – Worker Participation in the Safety Management System \(SMS\)](#)
- [Safety Culture – Demonstrating a Culture of Care and Support: The Leaders’ Role](#)
- [Safety Culture – Drug and Alcohol Testing](#)
- [Safety Culture – Incident/Accident/Near-Miss Reporting and Investigations](#)
- [Safety Culture – Safety Training](#)
- [Safety Culture – Safe Work Practices](#)
- [Safety Culture – Management Commitment: All Safety Incidents Are Preventable](#)
- [Safety Culture – Subcontractor Involvement in the Safety Culture](#)

About the Author

David O’Connor was elected to the National Academy of Construction in 2020. In his 40-year career with Amoco & BP, he has served in engineering, technical, and leadership positions in the UK, Norway, Egypt, the Middle East, Algeria, and the U.S. In 2015, he became head of all BP global projects in the Upstream Division. He is known for transforming project organizations into the best learning organizations in the industry. David retired from BP in 2020.

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