NAC Executive Insights

Safety Culture Series

Safety Culture —
Subcontractor Involvement
in the Safety Culture

Key Points

- Subcontractors' proactive involvement and engagement in the safety culture is a critical aspect of ensuring the overall safety and well-being of a construction project.
- Several methods are available to involve subcontractors in the safety culture throughout a project.
- Different types of subcontractors require different or adjusted approaches to involvement and engagement.
- Enforcement tools and incentives can be used, where appropriate, to improve performance.

Introduction

This Executive Insight explores the why, how, and when of subcontractor involvement in the safety culture, taking into consideration various types of subcontractors and their available resources. By understanding these aspects, organizations can develop effective strategies to foster a strong safety culture that encompasses all stakeholders.

Why Subcontractor Involvement Matters

Subcontractor involvement is critical to project safety and developing a safety culture. Reasons for this involvement include:

Risk mitigation: Subcontractors often bring their own employees, equipment, and methodologies to a project. Subcontractors often perform high-risk tasks; their involvement in the safety culture eliminates, minimizes, and mitigates these risks. Ensuring subcontractor alignment with the safety culture reduces the risk of accidents, injuries, and legal liabilities.

Regulatory compliance: Adherence to occupational health and safety laws requires the inclusion of all workers, including subcontractors. Regulatory bodies often hold primary contractors responsible for the

safety practices of subcontractors. Collaborating on safety fosters compliance and minimizes regulatory risks.

Reputation and trust: Maintaining a strong safety culture with subcontractors enhances an organization's reputation, fostering trust among clients, investors, and the public. A strong safety record improves a company's reputation and demonstrates corporate responsibility and leadership. Excellent subcontractor performance contributes to this outcome.

Cost savings: Reducing incidents through subcontractor involvement can lead to cost savings in terms of workers' compensation, insurance premiums, potential litigation expenses, employee morale and efficiency, and on-time performance.

Integrated safety standards: Uniform safety standards across employees and subcontractors ensure consistency in safety practices.

How and When to Involve Subcontractors in the Safety Culture

Involving subcontractors throughout the project has the highest likelihood of success. The greater the level of understanding and engagement, the better the performance. Some of the key opportunities to involve subcontractors follow.

Prequalification: Assess subcontractors' safety records, practices, and safety culture before engaging them in a project. Only collaborate and contract with those who meet predefined safety standards.

Clear communication: Establish open lines of communication with subcontractors. Ensure they understand the organization's safety policies, procedures, and expectations.

Training and orientation: Provide safety training and orientation to subcontractor employees to align them with the project's safety culture. Include topics such as hazard identification, emergency response, and reporting procedures.

Safety planning: Collaborate with subcontractors in the development of project-specific safety plans that address potential risks and that incorporate safety into project schedules.

Collaborative risk assessment: Involve subcontractors in identifying and assessing potential workplace hazards.

Providing resources: Ensure subcontractors have access to necessary safety equipment and information.

Auditing and monitoring: Regularly audit and monitor subcontractor safety performance. Address issues promptly and implement corrective actions when necessary.

Incentives and recognition: Encourage subcontractors to prioritize safety by offering incentives for safe practices and recognizing achievements.

Key times to involve subcontractors are both in the beginning of the project and throughout its progress: Involve subcontractors during the pre-contract stage when selecting and prequalifying potential partners. Conduct joint safety meetings and orientations at the project's initiation to ensure all parties are on the same page and to establish mutual safety expectations. Incorporate safety culture indoctrination at the beginning of the subcontractor's tenure. During the project, continuously involve subcontractors throughout the project's lifecycle by monitoring their safety performance and addressing issues in real-time. Regularly update and involve subcontractors in safety meetings and training sessions. After project completion, evaluate subcontractor performance in terms of safety. Once that assessment has been made, provide feedback and consider their track record for future collaborations and partnerships.

Types of Subcontractors and Their Resources

Different types of subcontractors may have varying levels of resources and expertise when it comes to safety. Understanding these differences can help organizations tailor their approach to subcontractor involvement in the safety culture:

Large established subcontractor: These organizations often have dedicated safety departments, comprehensive safety programs, and a strong safety culture. Collaboration typically involves aligning their existing practices with the primary contractor's requirements.

Small and medium-sized subcontractors: Smaller subcontractors may have fewer resources dedicated to safety. Support may include providing templates for safety plans, training resources, and ongoing guidance.

Specialized subcontractors: Subcontractors with specialized skills should receive additional specific safety training related to their scope of work.

Temporary labor agencies: Agencies providing temporary labor may have varying levels of commitment to safety. The primary contractor must ensure that temporary workers are adequately trained and informed about safety practices and expectations.

Working with unions: Some subcontractors have union workers. It is inappropriate to interfere in the subcontractor/union relationship but obtaining support of the unions present in the project helps to create a common safety culture. Asking the subcontractor to include the unions in the subcontractor's involvement in the safety culture can be highly advantageous.

Enforcement and Incentives

When desired, several enforcement and incentive strategies are available in developing a safety culture. One critical caution: penalties and incentive strategies should not be employed where the risk of driving subcontractor incident reporting underground exists.

Making compliance with safety standards a contractual requirement is an often-used approach. Many companies also conduct audits and inspections. Regularly auditing subcontractors for compliance ensures accountability and improves performance. Sometimes, penalties for noncompliance can be useful. This can be controversial, but smaller contractors with limited or nonexistent safety programs may find that avoiding penalties for safety violations is a compelling reason to comply.

Incentives for safety compliance can also be useful, particularly project-wide incentives. Recognition programs that acknowledge and reward subcontractors for exemplary safety practices may reinforce outstanding performance. Offering bonuses or other financial rewards for meeting safety goals is another potential incentive. Finally, safety scorecards can be used to monitor and encourage continuous safety improvements. Scorecards may create positive competition among subcontractors.

Conclusion

Involving subcontractors in the safety culture is essential for mitigating risks, complying with regulations, and building a reputation for safety excellence. Organizations should proactively engage subcontractors at every stage of a project, tailor their approach to the subcontractor's resources and expertise, and foster open communications and collaboration. By doing so, they can create a holistic safety culture that encompasses all stakeholders and ensures the safety and success of their projects.

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

About the Author

Craig Martin was elected to the National Academy of Construction in 2020. Craig is the retired president and CEO of Jacobs, one of the world's largest providers of construction services. He has contributed significantly throughout his career in creating positive safety cultures, creating the BeyondZero® corporate safety campaign that reshaped organizational culture. For his efforts and the resulting success

of the program, the National Safety Council magazine, *Safety + Health*®, named him as one of 10 "CEOs Who Get It." Craig also helped form the Incident & Injury Free (IIF) Executive Forum, a twice yearly gathering of industry senior executives who meet to share strategies on safety.

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