

In-field supervision can reduce error rates

*Editor's note: The following is part of an ongoing series about human error and its role in medical error. This month, author **Robert J. Latino**, executive vice president of the Reliability Center, Inc., in Hopewell, VA, discusses the advantages of supervision oversight in the field and its effect on human error rates.*

Sometimes, supervision is done from afar, with the supervisor removed from the employee's work environment. The following statistics demonstrate that in-field supervision is not a common practice:

- 16% of floor/field work was surveyed by supervisors
- 3% of supervisors knew what to look for during survey
- 1.3% of floor/field work was improved by supervisors

These statistics show that, in general, supervisors do not know what to look for, and that for the small number of efforts made, there was a low improvement rate, hardly making in-field supervision seem worth it.

But when done properly, in-field observation can lead to marked improvement.

Observation

Observation in the field consists of:

- Performing field surveillance, or actually being on the floor with the employees
- Conducting a job briefing prior to employment that outlines the initial premise of the plans and the conditions in which they were based and outlines what to do should the conditions change in the course of conducting the work, or if there is a shift in the plan itself
- Ensuring the above would be done with the involvement of the employees being observed

A supervisor performing in-field observations should be checking for the following, at a minimum:

- Work is being performed adequately and in compliance with applicable regulatory guidelines
- Work is being performed in line with the guidance provided by the supervisor
- There are no unexpected conditions present that would warrant a change in the plan being executed
- There are no hurdles or barriers preventing employees from doing their job properly

When supervisors are in the field observing employees, they should provide instant and constant feedback. If they wait too long from the point the undesirable behavior occurs, the feedback is less effective because the employee will forget what it was he or she did.

When supervisors are providing enforcement and feedback, they should:

- Make intentions absolutely clear so there is no room for interpretation
- Use precise wording and be very specific about desired behaviors or outcomes
- Reinforce expectations
- Provide positive feedback followed by negative feedback in a constructive manner

In-field supervision effectiveness

Now that we have discussed the why and how of doing in-field supervision, let's discuss how effective it can be and its effect on human error.

The benefits of in-field supervision include the following:

- With good observation techniques, 72%–85% of the causes of worker errors can be identified
- About 60%–70% of the causes can be effectively corrected by supervisors before the human errors are made (i.e., proactive approach)

More oversight results in less error. The better we are at surveying our employees' performance, the safer and more productive our work environments will be.

The effects of fatigue

Supervisors should be in tune to their staff members' levels of fatigue. Fatigue plays a major role in the workplace and is why many industries regulate the number of continuous hours that employees are allowed to work. Airlines, trucking companies, and healthcare are just a few industries that put caps on how long their employees can work continuously.

Often, employees underestimate their fatigue level, or they don't report feeling fatigued to their bosses. It is part of the supervisor's responsibility to pay attention to fatigue levels.

The effects of fatigue may include:

- **Impaired logic and reasoning.** Consider the effect on truck drivers or airline pilots if they have worked too many hours and then must face a situation with which they are not familiar. Chances are they may not have the ability to decide what the proper response should be.
- **Impaired attention.** This often makes focusing difficult, and the mind tends to wander. Impaired attention is commonly the result of a lack of sleep.
- **Slowed mental operations.** This could be a subset of impaired logic and reasoning because fatigue will slow down your ability to respond quickly.
- **Loss of situational awareness.** When employees are fatigued, they tend to have a narrow view of their surroundings as they try to focus on the task

at hand. This is a risk because you cannot employ your peripheral vision to see what is happening around you.

- **Slowed reaction time.** As a result of slowed mental operations, you will slow your ability to react in a timely manner to the situation at hand.
- **Shortcuts become optional.** As part of impaired logic and reasoning due to fatigue, you may opt to take shortcuts in your procedures in order to get a task done. This can become a dangerous habit.

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