

The supervisor's role in reducing human error

by Robert J. Latino, executive vice president, Reliability Center, Inc.

Editor's note: The following is part of an ongoing series about human error and its role in medical error. This month, Latino discusses the manager's role in decreasing human error. This is the second part of this column; the first part appeared in the March BOPS.

Many of the issues regarding the supervisor's role in limiting human error will be related to the training of the work force. Let's look at what is involved with ensuring that we have a qualified and consistent work force.

There are three phases to accomplishing this:

- Initial screening/learning phase
- Planned job observations (PJO)
- Performance review

Candidates are screened before they become employees or contractors. There used to be required apprenticeship programs in manufacturing facilities in which the craftsmen had to complete internships and demonstrate their understanding of how to do their jobs with precision. Unfortunately, this is a rarity in the 21st century as the baby boomers head to retirement. This will leave a huge void of talent in the work force, and the quality of our nation's work will suffer.

PJOs are employee evaluations that take place while employees perform their tasks. These are quality monitoring tools intended to focus on the concept of continuous improvement. By offering constructive feedback to employees about deficiencies in how they do their jobs, employees can be made aware of any gaps in performance and can alter their behavior accordingly.

We must be sure that the supervisor conducting the PJOs is qualified to do so. If not, we fall into the trap of "practice makes permanent" instead of "practice makes perfect."

When conducting on-the-job training, using unqualified teachers is dangerous. If the person conducting the training is teaching other employees incorrectly, those being trained won't learn the correct way to do a task.

Performance reviews or evaluations are commonplace today, but often for the wrong reasons. Performance reviews are often conducted on behalf of HR to allocate the distribution of raises.

A certain amount of money is available for raises, and a bell curve is established so that a certain percentage of people will get a smaller raise and another percentage of people will get a larger raise. The review will serve as a quantitative measuring tool to determine who gets what.

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However, performance reviews can also be valuable for providing employees a report card on how well they are doing the technical aspects of their job. This is an opportunity for managers to tell their staff members that if they change the way they do one part of their job, then it will improve their productivity by a significant amount.

Ensure effective learning

The following sayings illustrate the ways in which people learn:

- Tell me and I will forget
- Show me and I will remember
- Involve me and I will understand

Training must be targeted to the audience to which it is presented. We are all familiar with the various safety training programs we have attended in the past. The problem with many of these is that they are conducted because of regulatory requirements.

So, by this measure, success means that a person has remained in a seat for a specified number of hours. It usually has nothing to do with their performance once they leave the classroom.

Training must have outlined objectives that are communicated to the student and should be correlated in some fashion to key performance indicators.

Although we all are used to capital projects requiring a certain return on investment in order to be approved, how many of our training programs require the same? When no expectations are set, none are received.

Training must involve lecture (knowledge), exercises (skill), and demonstrated performance (application). If all three are not present, the benefits will not likely be derived.

Donald Kirkpatrick, a former professor at the University of Wisconsin, first published his training model in 1959 in a series of articles about the U.S. government. His model is now widely used in evaluating the effectiveness of training.

Let's briefly look at Kirkpatrick's Four Levels of Training:

- Reaction
- Learning/assessment
- Transfer
- Results

The first level, reaction, is how the student reacts to the training received. This is often associated with the evaluation forms filled out at the end of class.

The learning-assessment level is associated with conducting a pretest and a posttest. From this, we can measure the knowledge gap and discern whether the concepts presented indicate that a change in behavior will take place.

The next level, transfer, is similar to application. This means the knowledge acquired in the classroom was put to use in the field.

Results, the last level, signify that what was learned was put to use by staff members in the field and that a bottom-line benefit was demonstrated. Examples of bottom-line benefits include increased patient safety, increased production, improved quality, decreased costs, reduced frequency of accidents, increased sales, and even higher profits. ■

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