

>> Frequently Injured: Fire the Person or Fix the Problem?

Frequently injured workers have been classified as frequent flyers, accident-prone or at-risk. While the classification has been created, unfortunately, very few corporations have effective tools to help these individuals. Instead, the path of progressive discipline begins. Rarely is this the answer.

Recently, a plant manager anonymously shared the following with me: "If I had some tools to help this employee, I believe I could have saved his job. He was a great employee when it came to production; he just kept getting hurt. And I was concerned, at his pace, he might lose his life. There was nothing we could do. We had to help him find other employment."

In several organizations, a few workers represent a large percent of the incidents. So, do we fire these outliers or understand them and fix the problem? The answer says a lot about the desire for excellence.

This has become a frequently shared and visible concern in many organizations, necessitating the creation of individual coaching action plans (ICAP). Through years of research and application in multiple industries, ICAP have been created to effectively resolve such issues. The challenge will not be in the implementation of the strategies outlined below; rather, it will be in ensuring your site is ready, that you have protected yourself from potential negative side effects and have created an approach that fits the uniqueness of your site(s).

CRITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Prior to discussing the steps of implementation of the ICAP approach, it is important to first consider the following critical considerations:

➤ **Purpose** – What are we trying to accomplish with this approach? Are we taking this step because we truly care, or to minimize exposure? Empathy for the impacted individual is critical

to succeed and gain the trust of employees in this process.

➤ **Existing perception of coaching** – Is there an existing negative perception of coaching? If people already feel coaching is a negative consequence, they might be resistant to the process. Understanding and addressing this perception often is the first step to success.

➤ **Suppression of reporting** – If the approach is not properly designed, communication will be poor. If employees feel the intentions of the process are malicious (to punish them or get them in trouble), they might suppress reporting and develop a false perception that the individual coaching process is a negative consequence for injury.

➤ **Existing policies** – It is critical that the approach takes into consideration existing policies around discipline and the perspective and involvement of the human resources department to ensure understanding and support.

➤ **EAP** – Does your organization have an employee assistance program (EAP)? These programs assist individuals with personal situations and counseling for specific issues. It is critical to become familiar with the existing program if it is determined during this process that there are personal issues that can be best handled by an EAP.

➤ **Who is the coach?** – Several different approaches can be equally effective. The following types of individuals can be chosen to become coaches: fellow employees, local union representatives, safety represen-



tatives, human resources personnel, supervisors and plant managers. The question is, who is best in a position to help the employee develop the coaching plans (as later described), and who will have direct access to the individual on a frequent basis to conduct the coaching?

➤ **Confidentiality** – For the coaching to be effective, the discussions might need to be confidential. Is this a realistic expectation? Can someone truly maintain confidentiality in the discussion if they are acting as an agent of the company? Moreover, what if during the discussions a substance abuse concern is raised? If the individual has to notify other representatives of the company, is confidentiality compromised?

➤ **Communication** – How can we effectively communicate with employees to ensure they trust the ICAP approach? Some sites have chosen to communicate the use of this approach only to human resources, the safety department, the targeted employee and his or her direct supervisor. I encourage caution here, as once this information begins to be shared, it might find its way to the rumor mill, where information is rarely 100 percent accurate. I would encourage you to err on the side of caution and formally communicate with employees that the ICAP approach is in use and ensure knowledge transfer occurs. Additionally, if the site is a represented work force, ensure the local union is aware of the approach and, depending on the relationship between company management and the union leadership, has an opportunity to be involved in the design of the process to ensure ownership.

➤ **Training** – What is necessary to enable coaches to be successful? The critical skill set often includes interviewing and intervention, performance coaching, counseling, action plan development and familiarity with existing policies, procedures and programs. Typically, this coaching development is more role-playing and practice than lecture.

PRELIMINARY

INTERVENTION STEPS

Once you have designed a process

specific to your situation, culture and systems and have ensured coaches have the necessary skills, you are ready to begin the process. The first phase of ICAP is intervention.

The first thing you must do is identify the coach. Many companies have trained coaches available, depending on criticality of concern, level (e.g., if supervisor is the target) and shift of the employee. Identify who is best to both collaboratively develop the action plans and, in turn, coach the individual.

Discuss the intended approach and target with site leadership. Often this group includes the employee's direct supervisor, someone from human resources and the location or group manager. If the site has a bargaining representation, ensure the local union is aware and supportive of the reason for the approach.

The first interaction with the targeted employee is very important. Occasionally, the coach can carry out this discussion. Sometimes, the employee's supervisor, a representative from human resources and the safety director are included to ensure this is handled in a delicate and appropriate manner. If your location has bargaining representation, you should consider including them in the discussion as well. The primary objectives of this meeting are the following:



➤ **Express concern** – It is critical to the success of this methodology that the underlying theme is concern for the employee's well-being. This process must not be viewed as punitive or as company risk mitigation. A

coach should be perceived more as a DOC (demonstrating opportunities to care) vs. being a COP (catching opportunities to punish). How the concern is expressed is more important than many people realize.

➤ **Agree on the facts** – What actually took place immediately prior to the individual's injuries? If you do not have agreement on the facts that could contribute to the prevention of similar future events, there will not be agreement in solving the issue.

➤ **Agree to work together** – Simply put, if there is no agreement to work together, there will not be ownership in the strategies necessary to help the employee.

➤ **Discuss approach and purpose** – Provide a clear outline of the steps, methodology and timing of the process. This will ensure the employee is aware of the reason this action is being taken. Moreover, ensure he or she is prepared to commit to this exercise.

➤ **Plan the first meeting** – Collaboratively establish an immediate timeline for the first meeting to develop the ICAP.

DEVELOPING INDIVIDUAL COACHING ACTION PLANS

Once the intervention has occurred, it is time to develop coaching action plans. Skipping this phase will create significant barriers to success. If the targeted employee is not involved or his or her perspective is not understood, that employee will lack the ownership in the creation of action plans that can help minimize exposure to risk.

Interview for influences – The person interviewing the employees is encouraged to follow best practice interviewing and intervention skills. The questions, the projected empathy and the interviewer's behavioral response are critical to ensure continued trust in the process and, most importantly, the individual.

Pareto for prevention – Pareto analyze the employee's events with him and collaboratively look for all contributing factors (e.g., behavioral, conditional, procedural, organizational, etc.). Look at it in terms of prevention, not causation. Analyze all variables common to the employee's events, regardless of severity, for any possible trends. Identify all possible influences

on the events and subsequent trends.

Identify employer-led action items – The coach must consider that some action plans will be required of the organization to enable the employee to improve his or her personal safety performance. Not all plans will be directed at employee change. Such action plans typically have included training, work schedule or responsibility reassignment. In order to ensure measurability of improvement, the company action plans need to have an observable behavior to validate effort.

Identify employee-led action plans – These types of action plans fall within the responsibility and control of the individual. Often, these opportunities are behavioral in nature, although there will be a difference in a compliance or discretionary focus.

Coach the individual – Coaching is a complicated process that requires a more complete explanation than can be included in this article. Observation and forward-facing commentary are the two critical elements of

coaching. The selection of the coach is critical due to the frequency of feedback required for targeted employees. Many free resources can be found at <http://www.ProActSafety.com/insights> to enable further practical understanding of coaching for performance.

SUSTAINABILITY

It is a truism that any transformational focus only will be as successful as its reinforcement. This doesn't mean preaching the same message multiple times. Occasionally, it means modifying other approaches to complement or leverage the idea. Many companies have reported that a large concentration of injuries lies with new employees. They have recognized the value of modifying this ICAP approach and utilizing some of the principles to enhance their onboarding initiatives, like job shadowing and apprenticeship programs. This is exactly the thinking necessary for continued success.

Sustainability is only successful if

the barriers are identified. Prior to taking this sensitive step in safety, first consider assessing both your support (beginning) and reinforcement (sustaining) strategies. Only then can you identify the "strategy snipers" and land mines that could sabotage the success of your program.

Let's not have to learn from our mistakes; let's prepare and protect for a successful outcome. The goal is to help frequently injured employees to successfully experience a more complete, injury-free, safe and fulfilling life. Is there a more altruistic cause? **EHS**

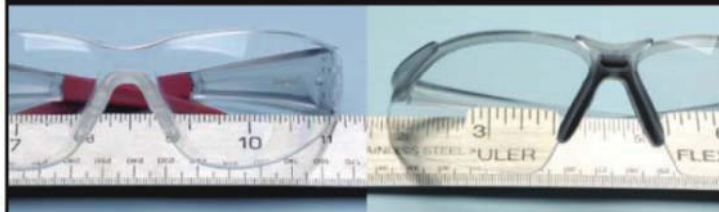
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