



## **Safety Incentive Programs Commonly Fail in Their Design**

Safety incentive programs have been around for years. Their goal is to change unsafe behaviors, reinforce safe behaviors, and improve morale. While many organizations report positive results with incentives, others fail miserably. Negative side effects can include feelings of entitlement, poor morale, and failure to report accidents. I would like to attempt to explain why some incentive programs work and others don't.

### **THE PROBLEM IS IN THE DEFINITION**

Let's begin by reducing the concept of incentives to its most basic elements. Incentives offer a reward in return for a desired action. The theory is that if employees perform the desired action long enough, it will become a normal behavior. This sounds logical enough. So where do things go wrong?

Maybe the deficiency lies in how we define the desired action. Many organizations link desired actions with the number of accidents. With this association, it is possible—likely, even—that a company will experience a decrease in the number of accidents reported. I stress the word “reported.” Incentives often lead to underreporting of accidents. A worker may choose to remain silent rather than report an accident or near miss so as not to cause the loss of his (or his team's) promised reward.

### **REDEFINING DESIRED ACTION**

So how can we avoid this pitfall? Let's go back to our simple definition of incentives: offering a reward in return for a desired action. Action means doing

something. Rather than linking these actions with reducing the number of accidents reported, consider defining what actions employees can take that will begin to develop a high performance safety culture. Such actions could include:

- Participating in a safety committee
- Recording safety observations
- Attending safety meetings
- Participating in new employee orientations
- Attending and participating in training sessions
- Conducting tool and equipment inspections

### **AVOIDING THE SENSE OF ENTITLEMENT**

Each organization should create its own list of desired outcomes. Include actions for both employees and management. Remember that to develop a high performance safety culture, everyone has to take action.

Make sure that the items on your list are ones that require action to be taken. Rewards that do not require actions are not really rewards and will be quickly viewed as entitlements. It's also important that each item on your list is measurable and verifiable.

### **KEEP IT FRESH**

One other thought about creating a safety incentive program: Change is GOOD. Every year or so revise your list of actions as well as the rewards. By continuing to change the program, employees and management are much less likely to become bored with it.

### **CONCLUSION**

Don't shy away from implementing a safety incentive program. Just make sure you thoughtfully identify what actions you want to encourage and get the whole team involved. Conney Safety offers a variety of products that can and have been used by our customers for successful safety incentive programs. Some of the products can be special ordered by select vendors.

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