

Understanding the Leadership Commitment Component of the Program

Studies have shown that one of the strongest predictors of improved safety results within organizations is the level of commitment and engagement of its top leaders. To enhance the existing program a visible safety leadership commitment by the CEO/GM is a prerequisite for program participation and is an important “first step” for maximizing commitment for safety at all levels of the organization. This commitment is not meant to imply that cooperative leaders have lacked commitment towards safety performance in the past; rather this new component of the program acts to reenergize and reinforce leadership expectations towards future engagement, examination of current practices and planning for improved safety performance. This commitment begins the process of moving the national program from a three-year event driven accreditation process to an on-going leadership driven process focused on continuous improvement.

Leaders will be asked to renew this commitment on a three-year cycle in conjunction with the formal on-site assessment.

The commitment consists of five elements and is a simple process that can be reviewed and completed within the existing on-line system. The five elements of the commitment are as follows:

1. Adopt the guiding principles of the program to help direct our actions towards continually improving safety performance
2. Participate in the formal three-year cycle safety program assessment, including an on-site observation;
3. Develop and maintain an annual safety improvement plan;
4. Provide on-going employee training, as needed, to help improve organizational safety awareness and competencies;
5. Provide an annual update of cooperative safety performance measures per the national program guidelines.

These five elements act to establish a consistent framework to help guide and support improved safety performance within each cooperative.

The first element of the leadership commitment is to adopt the guiding principles of the program within the organization. The two guiding principles are fundamental to achieving safety excellence and are established with the intent to reinforce decision-making, performance expectations and leadership behaviors within the organization towards providing safer work environments. These principles are:

1. **Safety is embraced as a core value**

- Actions and decisions reflect a fundamental and unwavering commitment to safety at all levels of the cooperative
- Cooperative leadership accepts accountability for a culture that drives safety performance

Safety must be embraced as a core value where the actions and decisions of the cooperative reflect a fundamental and unwavering commitment to safety at all levels of the cooperative. This is achieved

through a strong safety leadership culture. Cooperative leaders accept responsibility for a culture that ultimately drives safety performance.

2. Cooperative leaders and employees own the systems and processes that create a safe working environment

- Safety systems, as a shared responsibility, focus on enhancing safe behaviors and reducing unsafe acts and risks to injury
- Leaders commit to an environment in which all employees are owners of the safety culture

Cooperative leaders and employees must take ownership of the systems and processes that create a safe working environment. Safety systems are a shared responsibility and should focus on enhancing safe behaviors and reducing unsafe acts and risks to injury. Cooperative leaders commit to creating an environment in which all employees are owners of the safety culture.

These guiding principles are a minimum and cooperative leaders are encouraged to add principles that emphasize their own unique leadership philosophy and style.

The second element is to conduct a formal three-year safety assessment led by the statewide association safety professionals or other applicable supporting safety personnel.

The purpose of this formal three-year assessment cycle is to provide the cooperative with objective third party feedback concerning the strengths and opportunities for improvement within its existing safety program. This feedback acts as critical input into an annual safety improvement plan, which seeks to leverage identified strengths and help target actions toward needed improvement areas. This assessment helps participating cooperatives to focus on the valuable feedback received from the assessment as part of a formalized approach for continuous improvement.

The third element is to develop an annual safety improvement plan. The creation of a safety improvement plan seeks to help cooperatives formalize its planned safety improvement efforts into a disciplined continuous improvement cycle, similar to other critical performance areas such as finance, reliability, customer service, etc. An emphasis is placed on continually assessing the current state of safety performance then prioritizing improvement actions towards the greatest areas of improvement. The safety improvement plan also provides the cooperative leader with a mechanism to increase employee involvement in their improvement efforts (potentially improving the effectiveness of established safety committees) and to improve employee communications concerning important safety goals and priorities. The completion of an annual safety improvement plan is a key component to providing a disciplined organizational approach to continuous safety improvement with engaged leadership.

Cooperatives will have the flexibility to build their own plans, consistent with their own planning and management methods or use the available on-line training, template guides and resources, which will be made available through the program. Assistance from statewide association safety professionals or

other safety support personnel will be available to assist the cooperative in the development of the safety improvement plan as requested.

The program will also provide systems with self assessment options and other resources to assist safety improvement planning efforts on an on-going basis. Some of these options will include access to specific sections of the on-site assessment, safety organization culture surveys (both formal and informal), front line leadership assessment checklists, and other assessment tools in key performing areas. Over time the program hopes to provide open forums where systems can share their safety improvement plans to identify common initiatives and solutions to problems, key strategic safety issues, and best practices in an effort to continually strengthen their safety efforts.

The fourth element emphasizes the importance of a cooperative workforce maintaining a strong foundation of safety skills and knowledge through on-going training. This foundation is a key success factor in attaining of top safety performance. This leadership commitment recognizes the importance of continually assessing the level of safety core competency at all levels of the organization and based on this assessment providing appropriate training where warranted, some of these areas include leadership skills and practices, advanced safety concepts, craft skills, operating rules and procedures, regulatory requirements, HR practices, etc.

The fifth element of the leadership commitment is for program participants to provide an annual update of key safety performance measures within the programs on-line system. This data will be made available to all key stakeholders of the program and allow for the evaluation of past safety improvement efforts. Although only reflective of past performance (tailing indicators – are not a predictor of future performance) this evaluation can help guide our understanding of progress and what areas may need greater attention. This element will also give us the ability to review the data and make on-going comparisons of injury and accident rates at various level of the program (national, region, state, similar size and top quartile basis). Participating systems will know their performance trends and where they stand on a comparative basis. The information will be administered in a confidential manner; individual system data will not be shared outside the cooperative without expressed permission and used only for comparison at aggregate levels.

Summary

The intent of the leadership commitment is to emphasize and energize top leadership engagement towards improving safety results. This commitment is an important “first step” for maximizing commitment for safety at all levels of the organization. If effectively applied, this commitment will provide a foundation to establish an on-going leadership driven process focused on continuous safety improvement.