

The Merits of Safety Incentive Programs

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Are you still paying huge bills for injuries you should be preventing? Awards programs are part of the overall safety equation.

There are many questions regarding the merits of safety award programs. Are they effective? Do they produce the desired results? Could they be cost justified? These are very complex questions with no simple answers, because there are many ingredients that comprise successful programs. Even before attempting to answer these questions, it's important to distinguish between an incentive and a recognition program.



Incentive programs require a mental activity or exercise that stimulates effort or action.

They are proactive, before and during accomplishment. They should be designed to modify normal behavior by raising and more importantly, maintaining the highest level of safety awareness possible.

Recognition programs recognize accomplishment that is already known or experienced. They are reactive, showing appreciation after the accomplishment.

Both incentive and recognition programs have their place in a well-rounded safety program. No one should ever think that a stand-alone incentive or recognition awards program is all they ever need to solve their safety problems or address safety issues. An incentive program is just a piece of the safety pie. It is most often the missing piece, the piece that brings in the human element, the motivation, the encouragement, the reminder that safety is important. It should enhance and bring attention to the other pieces of the safety pie, such as safety training, safety equipment and the proper use of it, safety meetings, a clean and safe working environment and safety awareness.

Management and union support. This support must be visible, active and continuous, from the highest executive level to the supervisor on the floor. If those in authoritative positions do not endorse and drive the program, it has little chance of success. Workers respond and are motivated by the enthusiasm exhibited by those in positions of authority. Many companies do this by printing a letter of endorsement in their awards catalog, safety notes in payroll stuffers, safety newsletters, addressing workers at safety meetings, award functions and much more.

Well-defined goals and simple rules. If workers are going to be asked to help reach corporate goals and objectives, it's important that they know what those goals and objectives are. Goals should always be challenging, require effort and improvement, but they must be realistic and attainable. The program rules should be simple and easy for everyone to understand. Rules that are complicated will frustrate workers and render the program ineffective.

Positive and continuous communications. Corporate goals and program rules should be communicated in such a way that they will be a visual and constant reminder to workers of the company's commitment to safety in the workplace. This can be accomplished by printing them on program materials, explaining them at safety meetings, and at the program kickoff and displaying them in easily accessible public places such as at time clocks, on bulletin boards and in lunch rooms.

Positive reinforcement communicated on an ongoing basis by supervisors and upper management is a vital element in the behavior modification process. Safety awareness will become part of workers' everyday thinking and that's the key to a successful safety incentive program.

Accrual programs. The most effective program types in the industry today are those that allow participants to earn and accumulate safety stamps, points, coupons or other types of credits that can be redeemed at any time or saved up for awards of higher value. This encourages workers to set goals as they choose an award they want to work toward earning. Safety awareness is maintained at the highest level as workers go through the exercise each month of earning, accumulating and counting their credits to measure how close they are to redeeming for the award of their choice. Family involvement adds to the enthusiasm of the program as family members get involved in the award selection process. Again, it's important to remember that this process should be designed to reinforce and enhance the safety training, use of safety equipment and safety rules already in place.

Short recognition periods. It's a known fact that the extent of most people's ability to concentrate on a goal effectively is about 30 days. One of the major elements that distinguish an incentive program from a recognition program is the interval in which a worker is recognized and awarded for safety achievement. Many times, annual goals are forgotten until the award is given, which does little for safety awareness along the way. By simply breaking down the annual goal into monthly or even quarterly segments, safety awareness is greatly enhanced because the recognition period is shorter and is perceived as much more attainable. Additionally, the interval between the time the goal is attained and the award is received should be minimal. Immediate positive reinforcement will greatly enhance the achievement, which continues to maintain and raise the level of safety awareness.

Individual recognition. Built into our human nature is the need to be recognized. When workers are asked what are the most important issues pertaining to their jobs, recognition is generally among the top three. In many survey's, recognition ranks above compensation. If companies expect to attain certain safety objectives, they will be accomplished one worker at a time. Individual achievement is something everyone can grasp and identify with. Lottery and drawing type programs allow workers who qualify according to the rules of the program to participate for a "chance" to win the award. Although these programs do generate initial interest and enthusiasm, they tend to de-motivate workers quickly because there typically are more losers than winners. Safety lotteries and drawings can be effective if used in conjunction with an existing incentive program to boost awareness and keep the program fresh and exciting. It's important to the success of the program that all participants who achieve the company's safety goals and objectives be recognized individually. Team, department, plant-wide and other types of peer motivated goals are effective aspects of comprehensive incentive programs, however, if the program is weighted too heavily by peer pressure, it could be regarded as encouraging non-reporting of accidents and injuries or creating the "walking wounded" scenario. The emphasis of the program should always be toward the individual achievement.

Desirable awards. If the goal of the incentive program is to produce results by modifying normal behavior and creating safety awareness, the awards need to be enticing and desirable. Although the more traditional safety prizes such as T-Shirts, ball caps and pizza lunches are necessary as awareness boosters, they typically do not motivate employees to work safely. Awards are more desirable when they have a high-perceived value and when the workers are given the opportunity to choose their own awards from a wide variety of award items. Whatever the award may be, if the worker goes through the exercise of choosing it, it will remain in and around the home and will be a constant reminder of where it came from and what was accomplished to earn it.

It's a fact that most on-the-job accidents and injuries are the direct result of carelessness and distraction. Knowing this fact, it is also true that most of them are preventable. Many companies continue to fatalistically pay the bills for injuries

when they are a controllable expense. Even with comprehensive safety programs including the very best engineered controls, personal protective equipment, technical safety training and government interventions, millions of American workers are injured on the job every year and companies spend billions of dollars reacting to this. Realistically, there is no single element of a safety program that is going to solve all safety problems in any workplace. Proactive safety incentive programs, custom designed to address specific safety goals, play a vital part in raising and maintaining the highest level of safety awareness possible in all the other aspects of an overall, comprehensive safety program.