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Steering Team Leads Cultural Change at Volker Stevin

In a fast-paced, "get-it-done" environment, where meeting customer needs quickly is critical, safety can often take a backseat to productivity. When leaders at Volker Stevin realized their focus on production could sometimes have a negative impact on safety performance, they made a bold commitment to change the way they do business. Now, the heavy civil construction and contracting firm is building a sustainable culture of safety excellence that proactively identifies hazards before they become incidents.



Recognizing the need for change

In January 2013, leadership at Volker Stevin, a company of about 1200 employees based in Alberta, Canada, launched a committee to outline strategic needs for future growth and development. The committee's report motivated leaders to improve their safety performance metrics. Leaders engaged Caterpillar Safety Services for expertise in safety culture improvement and quickly learned that safety may start with policies and procedures but achieving operational excellence requires accountability and engagement.

"The Caterpillar philosophy matched beautifully with our executive leadership vision. We have experienced the other, rules-based principle. This model develops leaders, which made it easy to engage in the process. It's what we want. We want the accountability," said Dennis Locking, General Manager of Corporate Services.

Trevor Selymes, Safety Manager, added, "In the past, when trying to implement change in the company, it typically meant asking someone operating at full capacity to do more, or to do something different with little opportunity for implementation planning. This new process includes implementation planning and encourages ownership and accountability. The perception is different, and it creates acceptance among the employees."

With leadership buy in and support, Volker Stevin assembled a Safety Steering Team, comprised of front-line, middle and upper management representatives from across the company, to help develop, build and maintain the improved safety culture. The Steering Team participated in a workshop, facilitated by a Caterpillar consultant, to fully understand and embrace the operational models that provide a framework for an effective safety culture. The team used results from a company-wide Safety Perception Survey, which measured employees' attitudes and beliefs about how safety is managed within the organization, in order to define the current safety culture and target areas for improvement.

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“Our goal is to make safety meetings more about engagement and, overall, more meaningful to the employees.”

Michael Monette

Front Line Supervisor - Bridge Division
Volker Stevin



Engaging the organization

To start the cultural transformation, the Safety Steering Team focused on Volker Stevin's greatest challenge: active participation in safety management across all levels of the organization with an emphasis on visible commitment from leaders. Locking said, "If we don't know how to communicate with our people, nothing else will mean a lot. The idea of focusing on our safety meetings really resonated. It's an opportunity to talk to our employees, to impart messages and to teach." To inspire greater employee engagement, the Steering Team launched a Continuous Improvement (CI) team, comprised of front-line employees, to develop a system for improved safety meetings.



CI Team 2 developed a system to deliver quality safety contacts, replacing a safety observation process that was perceived negatively by many employees.

Michael Monette, a front line supervisor in the Bridge Division, said, "Our goal is to make safety meetings more about engagement and, overall, more meaningful to the employees." Matt Gard, Lead Hand in the Highways Repair Division added, "In order for these meetings to be effective, we need more participation and feedback. It's important for employees to be able to voice their concerns."

Looking ahead

With target areas of improvement identified by the Steering Team, the Continuous Improvement teams will bring the plans to action. Although the venture to achieve safety excellence is only in the infancy stages, members of the Steering Team are enthusiastic and confident about the future of the company.

"I like that it's more of a proactive approach versus a reactive approach to safety. You're not trying to bandage the problem; you are actually trying to stop the problem from happening," Monette said.

With the quest to achieve a safety culture of excellence well underway at Volker Stevin, leaders anticipate the improvements will provide a competitive advantage. It is also believed other advantages will be realized in areas of leadership and motivation through the principles enacted in the safety process.

"When we come out of the Steering Team meetings, we are all hyped up. We are excited about the change," Gard said. "If we want to be one of the top contracting companies, we need to have the safety aspect backed up as well. We need to be able to show that we can do the work, and do the work safely. Here's our proof. Here's our record." ■