

# The Best *Vs.* The Worst

by Mackenzie Wilson

The World's Best Safety Experts tackle the worst and most persistent safety problems.

## Engaging the frontline supervisor

### What works in reality

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**Everyone knows how important engaging the frontline supervisor is for world-class safety outcomes. And yet, companies all over the world struggle with this aspect. Why? It might be down to training, lack of motivation and accountability, or the hiring and promotion process: theories abound, but what really matters is what can be done about it. SafeStart Author Larry Wilson invites experts from exceptional companies to a SafeConnection Expert Panel webinar to get to the necessary real-world solutions.**

Larry begins the session by asking about the first steps to take:

- "We started realising that having [frontline supervisors] engaged was the key to success" says Sarah Morris (Plant Manager, Glanbia Nutritionals), so "we started getting them more involved. I've always understood the importance of safety, but for too long I associated a safe working environment with the physical things. At our plant we would continue to put money into the physical things and people would still get hurt."

- "The approach of a frontline supervisor is everything" says Jason Covarrubias (Health Safety & Environment Senior Manager, Procter & Gamble), given that some frontline leaders are coming straight from college: being put in a position where they are responsible for their team members can be a bit of a culture shock. "Going to the line and asking 'Why is it down?' versus 'Do you have what you need to safely correct the problem?' [involve] a totally different approach and tone."

- Peter Batrowny (President & CEO, PB Global EHS, Inc.) also emphasises the importance of understanding the mix of people you're working with: "Some companies promote [frontline supervisors] from within, some promote from technical ranks, or you may be working with recent

college graduates" he says. Thus there is a need to work with frontline supervisors one-on-one. "While theory is good" he says, "supervisors want coaching on what they can do to deal with the issues they are facing now, and they want to learn what tools, skills and techniques we can give them that will work for them."

Sarah agrees. "We didn't want to spend a lot of time in the classroom" she says. "We did weekly one-hour sessions...but we try to always go to them in smaller increments, rather than making people sit and watch educational videos".

The takeaway could not be clearer: people skills are a must-have for engaging supervisors.

- "There is only so much influence a plant, production, or safety manager can have on the frontline" says Sarah, "but the frontline supervisor is there the whole time and is constantly setting the example". The goal in their coaching then is to take them from being a strong technical operator to becoming a strong leader of the crew.

As well as soft skills, frontline supervisors have to be managed into shifting the needle towards the proactive while maintaining the reactive:

- A "thing that frontline supervisors need to realise" says Peter, "is that people don't make mistakes on purpose....We know this inherently, but their reaction to errors in the field doesn't always send that message. So instead of learning how to prevent the next one, people learn how to diminish and deflect".

- Knowing the difference between which activities are reactive (incident investigations and near-miss reports) and proactive (safety walk, risk assessments) is key, he notes, and frontline supervisors need to become more proactive.



asks the panellists how they go about selecting frontline supervisors when promoting from within.

• "You can groom them to be good leaders," says Peter. "You have to recognise that when your best welder gets promoted, you've got your worst supervisor and you lost your best welder, so you need to be proactive and start training people before roles are changed so they are ready to step into the role."

"When you give the person the promotion" asks Larry, "is it good for them to be in charge of the same crew they came from, or is it better to go to a different crew?"

• Jason explains that, at P&G, they have to relocate to a different site and lead a team they haven't been working with. "The first move can be the most difficult," he says, "but we don't put people in those situations if we're not confident they'll succeed".

• Sarah's workplace goes about this process differently: "We're in a rural location, with three-thousand people, so we don't really have the same liberty" she says. "Usually our pipeline is filled with frontline supervisors, and they cover vacations of people from different crews, so they're not going directly to leading their peers".


What about cases where supervisors come from outside? How can the safety outcomes be optimised?

• Peter's advice to new supervisors that come in is to understand who those influencers are and engage and build a relationship with them first. "Some folks come up through technical ranks and stay at a location for a long time" says Peter, "and even if they don't have an official leadership title, they are influencers in the location."

• Larry agrees with Peter's idea: "That's what I used to do when I was young" remembers Larry, "which is not a good age to get supervisors or managers taking you seriously. But I could go into the plant and find the peer-group leaders and get them to tell me what was going on there".

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**Pro tip on finding these unofficial leaders: "If you get them all in a room and ask them a controversial question, see who everyone turns their eyes to" suggests Peter.**

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Being proactive involves concrete planning at all levels:

• Jason has found that planning has been the most effective activity in terms of supervisory engagement. "Every production team at the start of every shift discusses what the expected risks are and the counter measures to prevent incidents" he explains. "Before every shift, at every P&G around the world....we ask 'where do you need support today? Where are the risks? Do we need help? Do we need to delay anything?'. And every level of leadership reviews these by 9:30am".

• Planning doesn't end with the frontline supervisor, however: Jason explains that every technician must do a dynamic risk assessment before any non-routine task, which the frontline supervisor and other leaders review and provide feedback on.

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**Experience insight from SafeStart's Larry Wilson about this kind of planning, which, he says, "can even be really beneficial when it's something you've done before," because then "you won't be thinking...or not likely to be thinking very much about what you're doing because of rushing, frustration, fatigue and complacency". He suggests getting employees to Rate the 4 States on a scale from zero to ten can add a lot of benefit to a risk assessment for a routine job.**

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A lot hinges on management's promotion choices: "You can offer voluntary training so you can see who has a sort of lean toward leadership", Larry says, "because not everyone wants to be a leader or a supervisor". He then



A growing skillset will induce more confidence:

- From a management perspective, it's also important to work closely with new supervisors to understand what they are committed to improve. "Spend time in the field with them to see how they're practising those skills" says Peter.

- Jason adds that challenging them to get out of their comfort zones to build skills in areas that might be unfamiliar to them is very valuable. "Sometimes they really surprise us and themselves with what they can do" he concludes.

Hearing all of these on-the-ground insights from our panellists, it's clear that successful companies understand the centrality of frontline supervisors. Serving as the connection between management and the shop floor, frontline supervisors have to navigate the space between peer and leader. Nevertheless, with practical, personalised training and plenty of one-on-one time with the trainers or consultants, and with other managers, they can become significantly more effective.

**In Sarah's words, "we need them to step into the role and evolve into strong leaders that enable world-class safety. Without the engagement of the frontline supervisor, nothing you do will really stick. There's no doubt about it: they are a group worth investing in". "One-on-one", Larry concludes. "That's definitely your best bet".**



## Take Aways

- ✓ Frontline supervisors need to be involved, but coach them on people skills.
- ✓ Encourage proactive actions such as safety walks on top of the reactive ones.
  - ✓ Plan at every level and at every opportunity.
- ✓ When promoting to supervisory level, build confidence through appropriately challenging leadership situations.
- ✓ New supervisors should identify the influencers in their team and build engagement.
- ✓ Managers should keep in constant touch to encourage safety skills development and new horizons.

- Based on SafeConnection panels on North America, Europe, The Middle East, India and Asia.  
- All opinions expressed in here are purely those of the panelists. They do not necessarily reflect the opinions or views of SafeStart and the panelists' companies.  
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