

Safety Zone: Developing Effective Safety Rules

Safety rules are necessary for any organization. Companies usually have general or specific safety rules. Unfortunately, many of them are “canned:” that is, they are taken verbatim from another source and do not accurately reflect the hazard of the operations or management’s safety policy.

Often, rules or even entire policies are adopted with good intention and to fulfill a legitimate need or possibly to meet a regulatory requirement. However, they may be adopted without adequate research and planning, leading to rules or work standards that exist “in name only.” This is akin to the proverbial dusty safety manual on a shelf in a dark room that is rarely referred to, or one that leaves front-line staff unsure on what safety rules apply to certain tasks or what exactly is expected of them in certain situations. To be effective, rules and policies need to be part of a living, breathing overall safety mission and integrated into the organization’s daily work activity.

Rules should always reflect the unique operation and setting. The writing of rules should be assigned to several people working together. The collective experience and judgment of several people will result in a balanced, more accurate and complete set of rules. The responsibility for rule enforcement lies with management. This should be clear in management’s safety policy statement. The following suggestions should be considered when formulating safety rules:

1. Before the writing begins, a study of applicable OSHA, state and other related regulations must be done to incorporate requirements and ideas from those sources into workable safety policies.
2. Employees and supervisors should be solicited for their suggestions. Identify the most knowledgeable, trustworthy employees and solicit their input for task-specific rules and standards. Use actual work settings as your proving ground.
3. Only rules that are logical and enforceable should be drafted. A rule that cannot be enforced may impair the effectiveness of other safety requirements.
4. Rules should be easy to understand. Short sentences, simple words and commonly known expressions will help achieve understanding.
5. Positive statements are more effective than negative remarks. Statements need to specify what is to be done rather than what is prohibited. Use the standards-based approach—who does what and when. Provide a means of measuring performance.

Safety rules are not effective unless they are enforced. Supervisors must be thoroughly familiar with all the rules, even those outside their range of responsibility. Setting a good example helps make enforcement easier. Often, violations of the rules are overlooked until an accident occurs. If the employees are corrected for each infraction of a safety rule or safe practice when it is observed, fewer occasions will require discipline. Ensure safety rules are formally reviewed on a tracked schedule to remain aligned with actual work being done. Account for changes in tasks, tools, environment and equipment. When modifying work processes, ensure the safety rules are updated as needed to keep pace as real-world conditions evolve. This exemplifies a technique that can keep safety rules relevant and effective.

All employees should receive their own copy of the rules. Rules should be discussed with employees during orientation and training. Additional copies of the rules should be posted in gathering places on bulletin boards and kept in work trucks, for example, as a constant reminder. A good practice is to have employees sign a receipt showing they explained the rules; they understand them and agree to obey them. The signed statement should be placed in their personnel files.

Formulating and putting into writing a company’s rules has several distinct advantages:

1. The interest and philosophy of management will be evident.
2. The rules can be structured and customized to the hazards within the operations.
3. Written rules will allow for more consistency than verbal orders.
4. Written rules are more amenable to enforcement and corrective action.

For additional resources and other safety and risk management subjects, visit the AmTrust Loss Control website: <https://amtrustfinancial.com/loss-control>

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