

Safety observations for coaching and recognition

This resource is part of SAIF's leadership project, which is meant to help employers and leaders of organizations establish strong and sustainable safety cultures using research-based concepts and strategies.

Effective leaders must observe the work of others so they can provide informed feedback on overall performance. When done well, observations can result in positive reinforcement of good work behaviors while providing an opportunity to coach employees on areas they can improve.

Put it in writing

Establishing a formal observation program is important to keeping good performance records that help when it's time to review employees. While walking through and having conversations with employees is good, it's even better if you document the interaction and use that form to follow up on issues you discover.

How to observe employees

Before starting observations, tell your workers what you will be doing and why. Let them know you will be observing work behavior because you don't want anyone to get injured at work. Use a checklist to record what's observed, and then share the form with employees and ask for input. The purpose of the observation is to achieve 100% safety, just like you strive for 100% quality or customer satisfaction.

Take a few minutes to watch employees at work and record your observations on a form (saif.com/S1251). If an employee is working unsafely, intervene to understand why. That's why it's important to listen to employees because it might reveal other issues. If they aren't wearing safety glasses, it could be that they fog up and it makes it hard to work, or maybe they don't fit well and often fall off. Observations provide an opportunity for understanding at a deeper level.

Remember, if you walk by an unsafe act and take no action to correct the situation, you've set a standard that such behavior is OK.



Some may think getting permission from employees to observe them will just make them work safely, and you won't get a true picture of what's going on. It's better to do it that way because it will uncover training opportunities or other issues that might prevent workers from performing their tasks safely. That creates a safer workplace for everyone.

Who should observe employees?

While it's important for supervisors to observe their employees, creating a program for peer observations is another way to make observations just another part of the job. You could start by establishing an I've Got Your Back Contract (saif.com/S992a_b_c) with all workers to create a culture of looking out for one another.

Depending on workplace culture, it might take some time for workers to feel comfortable with an observation program, no matter who is doing it. Be sure to engage with workers about the program regularly so you can change your approach if needed.

Another pitfall is when everyone is already very busy, and adding observations feels like “just one more thing.” Observations will be less effective if workers are just filling out forms to meet observation goals. Set the clear expectation that these are meant to promote safety, and that it’s important for the records to be accurate.



The power of positive reinforcement

Everyone wants and needs to know when they are doing their jobs right. When people receive positive feedback that the work is well done, they are more likely to keep doing the work that way.

A lack of feedback can lead to a drift towards unwanted behaviors in safety, production, or quality. Giving a simple thumbs up or verbal “good job” can help reinforce the behaviors you want. Recognizing safe work behavior in performance reviews shows your commitment to employee safety.

Nobody wants to be the “safety cop” who only interacts with employees when they are doing something wrong. Negative feedback only stops the undesired behavior and sets up a mentality of working just enough to stay out of trouble. Employees become more engaged in a positive work environment.

A safety observation program

There are many ways to do safety observations and they can be formal or informal. To effectively change behavior, the best approach is to put it in writing and follow up on them. An observation program is another way to promote safety by rewarding employees and coaching them to do better.

Activity ideas

- Create an observation program in your workplace by setting expectations and establishing procedures. Select a form or use SAIF’s form (saif.com/S1251) and ensure there is a path to follow up on issues that are found.
- Group discussion: Would an observation program work well at our organization? Why or why not?
- Walk through your facility and practice observations. What do you see?