

Make Safety a Habit

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Most of us have at least one bad habit we'd like to kick. But the term "habit" doesn't deserve a bad rap. Habit can, and should, be a positive concept in a public entity. Nowhere is habit more important than the area of workplace safety. A safe workplace, summer camp, clinic, training site or residence is somewhere we can be proud of. And it's also a place where our clients, consumers and customers feel welcome and valued.

In his book, [The Power of Habit](#), author Charles Duhigg shares how even a large organization can make workplace safety essentials, habitual. He describes how Alcoa CEO Paul O'Neill set about changing the habits of Alcoa employees to support his vision for safety. O'Neill's approach included the following components:

1. **Outline the goal and explain why** – O'Neill informed investors, managers, and employees that workplace safety was not only important, it was the company's number one priority. He explained, "If you want to understand how Alcoa is doing, you need to look at our workplace safety figures. If we bring our injury rates down, it won't be because of cheerleading or the nonsense you sometimes hear from other CEOs. It will be because the individuals at this company have agreed to become part of something important."
2. **Explain how and provide support** – Alcoa's managers were told to report any incident or accident without delay. They were also told that the company CEO would be in the communications loop for these reports. Along with reporting "what happened," employees were required to provide input on ways to prevent a recurrence. Keep in mind that a potential unintended consequence of this policy is under-reporting: employees who don't know how to fix a problem might try to bury it. Therefore, it's essential to convey the message that help is available—both to understand what happened, and also to come up with changes to prevent a similar incident.
3. **Make accountability real** – The aspiration of accountability is commonplace in the public sector. But less common is the will to take action when expectations aren't met, and people don't do the things they agreed to do. One of the best ways to turn accountability from aspiration into practice, is to make sure that expectations to live up to one's commitments are clear and apply to everyone—from the veteran board chair to the brand new summer intern.
4. **Celebrate process wins** – It's easy to recognize a staff member or volunteer who was a hero in an emergency, or whose efforts led to a new funding stream or line of business. It's harder, but equally important, to recognize staff who keep the mission on track by embracing culture change.

Making safety habitual doesn't happen overnight, while most of your staff are sleeping peacefully. It is hard work that happens each every day as staff see that stepping forward and stepping up to report unsafe practices is actually good for your mission. For more on workplace culture, check out the Spring 2014 edition of [Risk Management Essentials](#), and [The Goldilocks Principle: Creating a Culture That's Just Right](#).