



Employee Safety Excuses and How to Counter Them



Employee safety excuses and how to counter them

Picture this: You're in charge of safety for a global company, and the injury rate is 1.24%. How would you start to change a safety culture that's mired in excuses and the blame game?

Years ago, the Campbell Soup Company had a dismal safety program.

An article in *Harvard Business Review* revealed how David White, who became Global VP of Supply Chain at Campbell, transformed the company's safety program.

Within the span on 10 years, White helped cut the injury rate by 90%.

Here are his three keys to success:

1. Made an ambitious goal

Safety was one of the functions of White's job as Global VP of Supply Chain – and he made it his mission.



White's first line of business was to set an ambitious goal: cut lost-time injuries by 50% in three years.

He also made it clear that any time there was a lost-time injury, the plant or warehouse manager had to email him within 24 hours. There was pushback – a clear sign of the poor safety culture.

But as safety pros have told us, White had to be bold and persistent.

His message was clear: Safety is incredibly important, and it involves people's lives.

2. Showed some tough love

White showed compassion in his pursuit of safety excellence, but he was also tough when he had to be.

He leaned on progressive discipline to show he was serious when workers and managers broke the rules.

People had to be held accountable.

When a Belgium plant manager gave endless excuses about the facility's poor safety record, White had no qualms about replacing him with a new manager.



3. Waved the 'safety flag'

The last step was to give incentives to plants that had good safety records.

White developed a safety flag for plants with good safety records. The facilities would proudly fly the flags in front of their building, and the idea became wildly popular.

Accountability is key

That was Campbell's recipe for success for combatting employee safety excuses. But we wanted to know what other companies did.

To get a sense of how safety pros handle employee excuses, we gave them a scenario about PPE and asked them what they would do.

In the scenario, employees were using safety gear but not returning it. As a result, when some employees went to find PPE to do their jobs, none was there.

The company gave employees reminders to return their PPE and made sure they were restocking on a regular basis. But the problem persisted.



The exact solutions safety pros suggested varied somewhat, but they all came down to what one manager told us: “Accountability is key.”

Exactly what employee accountability will look like will vary from workplace to workplace. For some, it was just having employees sign out their PPE when they used it and sign it back in when they were done. For others, progressive discipline for lost PPE had to be used.

Here’s another company’s solution: Our associates have access to our parts room for PPE. Each associate signs out the first set of PPE required to perform their jobs. If the equipment is damaged due to normal wear and tear, expired etc. they can return it to the parts room for a one-for-one replacement. However, if they lost it or something then they are responsible for the equipment and replacement costs. OSHA requires the employer to provide PPE however after many discussions with them; this is completely acceptable. This places the responsibility on the associate.

The top 5 excuses for dropping the ball on safety

Safety excuses go beyond those having to do with PPE.

Chances are you've heard most of them.

We asked safety pros what the most common excuses are that they hear. Here are the top five excuses and what to say when workers try to use them.

1. 'It won't happen to me'

Two polar-opposite groups of workers often use this excuse.

Veteran workers think they've seen it all before, and if they haven't been hurt yet, they must be doing something right, when in fact, they've just been lucky.

Young workers think they're invincible.

The response: Telling these workers that gruesome injuries happen isn't enough. To really send the message, ask workers who've suffered an injury to share their stories, or include some gory images in your next training.

2. 'Safety's not my job'

Some employees see safety as a separate department, so they're not responsible for it.

The response: Remind employees how their own actions can have a major impact on co-workers or even the public. A safety lapse can impact other employees and also the company's bottom line, from workers' comp costs to OSHA fines.

3. 'Safety's boring'

Employees often associate safety with boring training sessions or confusing OSHA regs.

The response: Get workers involved in training. Encourage them to actively participate or even lead a session. That way at least they'll have an appreciation for what it takes to get others engaged in the topics.

4. 'The gear's uncomfortable'

It's the most common excuse when workers are caught not wearing PPE.

The response: Give workers a say in PPE selection. Get a few employees to test new gear and let them pick which new equipment to buy.

5. 'I just forgot'

This is the toughest excuse to counter, because it's often a cover for some other excuse.

The response: Get tough on this excuse. If a worker forgot "just this once," issue disciplinary action "just this once."

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