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Safety Incentive Programs

A safety incentive program can encourage employees to practice safe behaviors until they become instinctive, contributing to a stronger culture, and reducing harmful incidents.

However, a poorly managed safety program can do just the opposite.

Research has found poorly managed safety incentive programs lead to underreporting of injuries, incidents and near misses because workers do not want to lose a potential reward.

This results in management failing to take corrective actions, thereby increasing the likelihood of repeat incidents or failure to identify serious safety hazards.

Because of this, many safety incentive programs have been abandoned. That does not mean safety incentive programs cannot be part of an arsenal of tools used to achieve higher levels of safety. It means they need to be properly executed to achieve the desired outcomes.

To secure success, safety leaders must know what OSHA views as permissible and impermissible safety incentive programs, define their approach and follow best practices for effectively implementing these programs.

The success of any safety incentive program hinges on the value of the rewards employees receives.

What makes a motivating reward?

- Gather employee input. When designing the program, ask employees what incentives would motivate them.
- Make rewards visible. Rewards should be easy to display, such as hard hat stickers or T-shirts, rather than hidden rewards, such as gift certificates that only the recipient sees. Combining these rewards might offer the most value to employees.

- Involve employees' families. Rewards that benefit the whole family, such as a grocery store gift certificate, may be more meaningful to employees and help involve the whole family in encouraging employees to act safer.
- Spread out rewards. Motivate as many people as possible by recognizing many employees with small rewards rather than only a few employees with large rewards.
- Focus on individual rewards. Studies show that individual rewards are more influential than group awards.
- The best rewards are extrinsic and intrinsic. Combining extrinsic rewards, such as money, shirts, stickers, and hats, with intrinsic rewards, such as sincere public appreciation, is often most compelling.
- Consider the effect of cutoff points. If the cutoff for receiving a reward is reporting an incident, employees may not do so or may decide to stop actively participating once eliminated from the chance to earn a reward.

Finally, remember that while a safety incentive program can help workers develop better safety habits, the program is just one part of an overall safety program and culture.