

## Safety recognition programs

Recognizing and rewarding safe behaviors can be an effective way to prevent workplace injuries, increase safety awareness, and lower workers' compensations costs. At its best, a well-designed safety recognition program supports your company's goals and helps everyone succeed.

The key? Make sure your safety recognition program is part of a robust safety and health management system. And be sure that it rewards the right things.

### What is a safety recognition program?

The United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) describes two types of recognition programs:

**A behavior-based program** rewards workers for behaviors such as reporting near-miss incidents or recommending safety improvements. This system measures *leading indicators*, which are related to inputs—the actions workers take as part of an overall safety program. These actions may include:

- Identifying best safety practices
- Reporting hazards
- Participating in safety meetings
- Conducting safety observations
- Getting involved in safety and health management

A behavior-based program also avoids the appearance of retaliation that can be associated with a rate-based system.

**A rate-based program** rewards workers who had few or no reported injuries or illnesses during a set period of time. This system measures *lagging indicators*, which are based on output and results.

Drawbacks to a rate-based program include:

- Puts blame on the employee and their injury



- Increases internal competition, which can create tension between individuals and work groups
- Is based on performance; does not identify reasons for fewer, or less severe, injuries
- Causes frustration when not awarded regularly
- Focuses on the absence of injury; does not promote safety

Also, a rate-based program may discourage employees from reporting injuries, which can result in legal and financial penalties. If fewer injuries are reported, employers may get a false sense of the program's effectiveness.

(Continued)

## How do we get started?

For a safety recognition program to yield positive results, the organization first must have a well-developed and well-supported safety and health management system. Prizes and other incentives won't mean much if management isn't committed to safety and employees aren't engaged. Also, safety recognition programs aren't a replacement for jobs and equipment that are designed and operated with safety in mind.

Before launching a safety recognition program:

- Decide on a budget.
- Determine who will administer the program.
- Develop objectives and goals.
- Designate rewards.

## What are some guidelines for designing an effective safety recognition program?

- Activities to earn rewards should be specific and achievable.
- Everyone who meets the criteria should be rewarded.
- Small awards for many are better than one big award for one person.
- Rewards should be linked to safety.
- Contests should not reward one group at the expense of another group.
- Groups should not be penalized for failure of one individual.
- Progress toward achieving a safety reward should be tracked and posted.

## What are some examples of positive rewards?

- Group celebration (i.e. holiday dinner, company BBQ, pizza party)
- Small gift certificates/gift cards
- Reward pins
- Lunch-and-learn sessions
- "Safety bucks" good for company or vendor catalogs
- Peer or guest compliments posted on bulletin board
- Personalized thank-you notes from manager
- Movie tickets or video rental gift cards
- Company branded prizes such as hats, t-shirts, etc.

## What pitfalls should we avoid?

- Don't let your program become stale or routine; stay energized!
- Keep competition out of your recognition program.
- Make sure management is committed and supports the program.
- Provide sufficient resources to administer the program.
- Ensure that rewards are meaningful to employees.
- Keep in mind that incentive awards may be taxable. Consult with a tax professional for guidance.

### To learn more

*OSHA, Employer Safety Incentive and Disincentive Policies and Practices*, <https://www.osha.gov/as/opa/whistleblowermemo.html>

*OSHA, Revised VPP Policy Memorandum #5: Further Improvements to the Voluntary Protection Programs (VPP)*  
[https://www.osha.gov/dcsp/vpp/policy\\_memo5.html](https://www.osha.gov/dcsp/vpp/policy_memo5.html)